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Claremont McKenna College

Mobilization and Polarization:  
American Jewish Politics Following the 2016 Election

submitted to  
Professor Aseema Sinha

by  
Jennifer Gurev

for  
Senior Thesis  
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## **Abstract**

The 2016 election sparked fundamental changes in American politics. From the rise of Donald Trump's popularity to the growth of progressive protests in response to his election and subsequent policies, this paper explores how fundamental changes stemming from the 2016 election directly impacted American Jewish interest groups and political stances, particularly on the issue of Israel. Prior to the 2016 election, the American Jewish community was growing increasingly divided on Israel primarily due to the disparate experiences between young Jews and that of older generations, as well as increasingly right-wing Israeli politics. However, the election of Trump—and his alignment with pro-Israel policies—furthered the already existing divides across American Jewish politics. The result has been increased polarization between American Jewish groups and the mobilization of progressive groups to counteract pro-Israel organizations and Trump's illiberal policies. This paper aims to illustrate how these changes within American Jewish politics are connected to the 2016 election through three case studies of Jewish Israel-related organizations from across the political spectrum.

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# 1

## Introduction

### About

The election of President Donald Trump was a tumultuous time in America. The months leading up to November 2016, and the months following, elucidated and further intensified political polarization across the United States—divisions that often pervaded previously united communities. American Jews are just one example of an identity group that experienced significant changes following the 2016 election. American Jewish life has always had some religious political and cultural divides. However, over the last four years, American Jewish interest groups' mobilization and actions have changed; significant growth within and acceptance of particular American Jewish interest groups indicates either changes to Americans Jews' political stances or, at the very least, a newfound willingness to mobilize around their beliefs. One example is the liberal pro-peace and pro-Israel organization J Street has increased its traction in the American Jewish community. Moreover, as organizations outside of established American Jewish organizations grow in popularity this signifies a shift in the broader representation of different viewpoints across organizational life.

These changes generate a research question: How have fundamental changes in America's political culture shaped American Jews' political stances and affected the representation of viewpoints within American Jewish interest groups? I explore this research question through three case studies; the American Israel Public Affairs

Committee, IfNotNow, and J Street. In these case studies, I analyze the recent internal changes within American Jewish organizations related to Israel and/or the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. I argue that the recent changes within these organizations elucidates how the election of Donald Trump has catalyzed changes to American Jewish life.

This chapter provides an introduction to my research question. I chose to explore changes within American Jewish life through changes within organizations, rather than overall through polling data. Although the most recent and reliable polling and survey data can illustrate the broader religious, political, and cultural trends of American Jews, this data alone cannot adequately answer my research question. Instead, an exploration of three very different American Jewish Israel-related organizations—each of which have experienced significant and important internal changes since 2016—provides a clearer picture of how Jewish life has changed. This chapter concludes with a discussion of my methodological approach to exploring these three Jewish organizations and a roadmap that describes how each chapter contributes to larger arguments in response to my research question.

## **Polling Data**

In order to understand the changes underlying Jewish political social life, I analyze how polling data has approached this question. The lack of recent, unbiased, and accurate polling data reveals the need to look deeper at organizational history and changes—which is the goal of this thesis. Although the existing sociological research and polling depict the broad spectrum of cultural, religious, and political beliefs and practices of American Jews, this data falls short of depicting the changes to American Jewish life



since the 2016 election. American Jews hold a vast spectrum of viewpoints on all issues—religious, political, cultural, and social. For example, while some do agree with the actions and beliefs espoused by President Donald Trump, many disagree with the current President’s policies. The vast changes in American politics since 2016 have likely impacted American Jewish political life. Nonetheless, there is a lack of recent, comprehensive, and unbiased polling of American Jews and reports since 2016, meaning that other methodological strategies must be pursued in order to better understand and document these changes. Without accurate and recent polling data it is also difficult to discern the extent to which apparent changes in American Jewish politics were the result of internal factors or have been driven by external American politics.

The most recent and extensive survey of American Jewish politics, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” was conducted by Pew Research Center in 2013, several years before the more recent changes that I am examining began taking place. This data is still important as it depicts the previously existing divides and trends, and can be compared across time to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey.<sup>1</sup> However, the lack of more recent survey data means that these findings are no longer accurate today, and that it is difficult to document how the changes in American politics resulting from the 2016 election might have spurred changes. Throughout my thesis, I compare the 2013 Pew Research Center report to the minimal recent and reliable survey data that I have found.

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<sup>1</sup> These results are based on two surveys with two different populations. Although they provide some structure to compare across time, the surveys’ different methodologies may limit the accuracy of comparison. Pew Research Center describes how these differences include, “different questions to identify Jews, different questions to examine attitudes and demographics, such as intermarriage and child rearing, different approaches in and in statistically weighting the data” (Pew Research Center 2013).

The survey data I have examined depicts the already existing divides within American Jewish life. American Jews are not one unified group with similar beliefs and practices; rather, they are a fragmented population with many disagreements over the issues, values, and practices that define their ideas of Judaism. To start, American Jews are incredibly religiously diverse as illustrated by the vast number of denominations. The 2013 Survey documented this denominational diversity identifying 35% Reform, 18% Conservative, 10% Orthodox (including ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox, 6% other (including Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal movements), and 30% non-denominational (Pew Research Center 2013, 10). The 2013 survey also denoted a trend of decreasing denominational attachment across generations. Compared with the older generations, younger Jews were “more likely to have no denominational attachment” (Pew Research Center 2013, 49).

Although there is political diversity, in 2013 American Jews supported the Democratic Party over the Republican Party by “more than three-to-one: 70% say they are Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party, while 22% are Republicans or lean Republican” (Pew Research Center 2013, 16). This was largely consistent with surveys from the decade prior where roughly two-thirds of Jews identified as Democrats or Democratic-leaners (Pew Research Center 2013, 96). The voting patterns of American Jews in the 2016 presidential election also aligns with the 2013 data, since 71% voted for Hilary Clinton, and 23% voted for Donald Trump (CNN 2016). Meanwhile, in the 2018 midterm elections “roughly eight-in-ten Jewish voters (79%) cast their ballots for Democrats (Sciupac and Smith 2018).

There is also some alignment between denominational and political affiliation. Whereas 77% of Reform Jews and 77% of non-denominational Jews are Democrat or lean Democrat, Orthodox Jews do not fit the democratic Jewish paradigm: “roughly half...describe themselves as political conservatives, and 57% identify with or lean toward the Republican Party” (Pew Research Center 2013, 95).

The spectrum of beliefs within Jewish America also extends to different notions of what practices are essential to Judaism. Today, one of the most polarizing and important issues of disagreement is whether attachment to and support for Israel is an essential practice. This issue has likely gained traction since the very existence of a modern state, and many older Jews’ personal memory of living in a time without a Jewish state, pushes the majority of Jews to grapple with what the state does or ought to mean to them. For one population of American Jews today—or 4-in-10—an emotional attachment to the modern Jewish state is central to their practice of Judaism. Polling data from 2000 and 2013 depicts that the relative number of American Jews who are “very or somewhat attached to Israel” has remained relatively stagnant (Cohen, Mott, Blass, Schwartz, Ament, Klaff, Kotler-Berkowitz 2001).

Although many factors might be correlated with emotional attachment to Israel, the 2013 profile indicates a correlation between attachment to Israel and particular denominational and political affiliations, as well as age. Orthodox and Conservative Jews were more likely to see Israel as an essential part of being Jewish (at 55% and 58% respectively) as opposed to Reform and non-denominational Jews who are much less likely see Israel as an essential part of being Jewish (at 42% and 31% respectively) (Pew Research Center 2013, 54). American Jewish Republicans are much more likely to see

caring about Israel as an essential part of being Jewish than Democrats (Pew Research Center 2013, 57). Moreover, the older generation of American Jews is also more likely to be attached to Israel; whereas 35% of American Jews over 50 were very attached to Israel, this was true of only 25% of American Jews under the age of 25 (Pew Research Center 2013, 54).

Although for some American Jews Israel is central to their Judaism, many others define their identity through other practices and values. According to the Pew Research Center 2013 profile, many more of the surveyed American Jews valued four other practices higher than Israel. These other values are remembering the Holocaust, leading an ethical/moral life, working for justice and equality, and being intellectually curious (Pew Research Center 2013, 57). The results of a more recent Jewish Electoral Institute poll published in May 2019 similarly illustrated how Jewish Americans today prioritize a broad diversity of political issues more than supporting Israel. This JEI survey had Jewish voters rank their political priorities and found that “Israel ranked 16th out of 16 issues” that mattered when deciding upon which candidate to support; instead they prioritized other issues like protecting Medicare and Social Security (Quoted in Rubin 2019).

Another area of vast disagreement is approval of President Donald Trump and his administration’s policies. Approval of President Trump has been complicated by the number of actions Trump has taken to appeal to the pro-Israel camp of Jewish Americans. To start, Trump moved the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Second, in May of 2018, President Trump withdrew from the much-debated Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the “Iran Deal” which was signed during President Barack Obama’s term in 2015. Next, the Trump Administration, in a highly

controversial move, recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Even more, President Trump has not pressured the Israeli government to halt the continuous expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. In November 2019, the Trump administration declared that they do not see Israeli settlements as a violation of international law (Lederman and Williams 2019). The combination of these pro-Israel policies has contributed to many pro-Israel Jews' support for Trump.

Since American Jews are in no way a homogenous group, other American Jews have expressed extensive disapproval of President Trump; they disagree for a diversity of reasons, making overarching assumptions implausible. For American Jews who identify with the Democratic party and are pro-Israel, the election of Trump placed many in an uncomfortable position: they had to decide whether they would praise and thank Trump for delivering several monumental pro-Israel policies, despite their disagreement with his other policies. At an American Jewish event, President Trump appeared to “blur the lines between the American Jews in the audience and Israelis,” referring to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel at one point as “your prime minister” (Cochrane 2019). This has led some American Jews who are more critical of Israel to push back on the assumption that loyalty to Israel can buy American Jewish votes. A 2019 Pew Research Center poll shows that 4-in-10 American Jews believes that Trump is favoring the Israelis too much, especially in ways his policies affect the Israel-Palestinian peace process (Smith 2019).

For American Jews who disapprove of President Trump, their beliefs have also been largely shaped by Trump's policies to undermine the rights of other minorities, including Muslims, Latinx, and LGBTQ people, among others. Many have mobilized

within Jewish and non-Jewish groups to organize against President Trump, particularly against those policies that have negatively impacted and undermined minority groups as a result of his policies.

Jewish Americans today are also concerned with how President Trump's actions have affected the physical safety and emotional well-being of American Jews. The 2019 JEI poll illustrates how many Jewish Americans disapprove of President Trump's actions and policies, as it relates to the security of Jews in America:

nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of Jewish voters believe Jewish Americans are less secure than they were two years ago, 71 percent disapprove of the way President Trump has handled anti-Semitism, and nearly 60 percent believe that he bears at least some responsibility for the shootings at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway. (Rubin 2019)

Some American Jews point to Trump's endorsement by white supremacist groups and how the rise of Trump has invigorated the efforts of these groups. For example, they see the violent Charlottesville protest in 2017 as a pivotal example of how Trump's policies, such as his immigration policies and the Muslim Ban, have given rise to, and legitimated, the intolerance views of extremist hate groups. Even more, the four violent incidents on American Jewish communities since October 2018 have invoked fear. Most notable was the 2018 Pittsburgh shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue which was the largest attack on Jewish lives in American history, killing eleven and injuring six (Margollin, Torres, Barr 2020).

Overall, polling data can, in broad brush strokes, indicate that larger changes have and are taking place within American Jewish life. The 2013 Pew Poll, for example, does provide a clear picture of the previously existing schisms among American Jews before the Trump era. However, without unbiased and recent survey data, it is not clear how the

2016 election results have interacted with and continue to affect the multitude of American Jewish opinions on divisive issues, particularly Israel. The impact of other recent and resulting changes in American politics since 2016, like increasing political polarization between Republicans and Democrats or the growth of progressive politics within the Democratic party on American Jewish political opinions and mobilization, requires further examination. This lack of recent, widespread, and unbiased polling data has motivated me to look for evidence of how fundamental changes resulting from the 2016 election directly impacted American Jews' political mobilization and public opinions. Therefore, I instead examine three Israel-related interest groups from across the political spectrum. Examining how particular groups of American Jews with different sets of beliefs have changed since 2016 can provide insights to my research question of how fundamental changes in American Politics have impacted American Jewish political life.

### **Interest Groups**

My thesis examines three Israel-related organizations—each with their own distinctive values, issues, and strategies—to better illuminate shifts in American Jewish life among different segments of the population. The first organization I explore is the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) which is an important member of the American Jewish establishment. As a bipartisan pro-Israel lobby group, AIPAC's mission is to “to strengthen, protect and promote the U.S.-Israel relationship in ways that enhance the security of the United States and Israel” (AIPAC 2020). Although it is not explicitly Jewish, it is the most powerful pro-Israel organization that attracts American

Jews and is a member of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (Cop). As the “vital core” of AIPAC’s membership, American Jews from across the country support the organization by donating money, lobbying Congressional Representative, attending events like the annual national Policy Conference event in Washington, DC, and meeting regionally in local Jewish spaces (Bruck 2014).

AIPAC exists among a much larger and broader network of establishment organizations. Historically, established American Jewish groups have provided a united front on Israel, promoting ‘blanket’ support for American pro-Israel and domestic Israeli policies. Many of these organizations have existed for decades and serve at the heart of American Jewish cultural and religious life. One way of understanding the boundaries of the establishment are those organizations who are members of an institution called the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CoP). Encompassing fifty-one prominent organizations, CoP aims to create an apparent consensus on Jewish issues (CoP 2019). Organizations within CoP are voted in by its member organizations. While some hold semi-diverse viewpoints, the member organizations have banded together to work towards the mission of “advance[ing] the interests of the American Jewish community, sustain[ing] broad-based support for Israel and address[ing] the critical concerns facing world Jewry” (CoP 2019).

AIPAC (along with most establishment organizations) can be described by the value of “particularism.” This term describes and defines “how Jews see themselves in relation to Gentiles, their obligations to those inside and outside the Jewish community, and their sense of the purpose of the world” (Barnett 2016, 7). Central to particularisms is a notion of Jewish purpose and place in the world as *Am Segulah*, or “chosen people.”



This value understands the Jewish people as distinctly and uniquely situated in the world and aligns with how AIPAC understands the Jewish historical experience and advocates for the Jewish connection to Israel.

Throughout American Jewish history, establishment organizations have long faced scrutiny and questioning from American Jews who disagree with policies pursued on issues like Israel. However, the American Jewish establishment today faces unprecedented challenges that stem from other American Jewish organizations. In particular, two new organizations—J Street and IfNotNow—have arisen that represent the different types of challenges faced by the establishment. These organizations question AIPAC (and others) right to power and their ability to dictate American Jewish policy on Israel. They also present difficulties to the establishment by drawing otherwise engaged membership, particularly among younger generations. While the two organizations are similar in that they both challenge the establishment, they take two very different angles.

My thesis compares how J Street and IfNotNow's different values, strategies, and issues differ from one another, and from AIPAC, as well as how recent changes in American politics have affected each group differently. The growth and creation of both IfNotNow and J Street are significant for two major reasons. First, they reflect recent changes in the viewpoints of American Jews over controversial issues like Israel. Second, the founding of these organizations marks a new period in American Jewish life as they provide the space for better representation of diverse viewpoints outside the structure of the American Jewish establishment.

The second case study follows IfNotNow (INN), a Jewish progressive activist group that was founded during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict by American Jews who were

“angered by the overwhelmingly hawkish response of American Jewish institutions” (INN 2019). The organization’s goal to “end American Jewish support for the occupation,” seeks to ground their movement in the “values of Jewish tradition” (INN 2019). Unlike the Jewish establishment that is defined by the value of particularism, INN has embraced universalism (Barnett 2016, 7). Universalism encompasses an obligation to care for all people around the world, whereas particularism prioritizes care for other Jews.

One way that INN has challenged the American Jewish establishment is through protests outside AIPAC’s annual Policy Conference in Washington, DC. Comparing the growth in the number of protestors between 2016 and 2017 provides a clear indication of the changes and challenges to American Jewish life today. Whereas in 2016, INN’s protest was comprised of approximately 200 people, by 2017 the number of American Jews who mobilized outside of AIPAC’s policy conference grew by 500 percent. This was the largest, mostly Jewish, protest in AIPAC’s organization’s 54-year history with more than 1000 protestors present (Bellware 2017). Although American Jews have long protested and questioned the policies of established Jewish organizations, this particular protest should be regarded as significant both due to its magnitude and implications to the status quo among American Jewry.

The third organization, J Street, stands somewhere in the middle between INN and AIPAC in terms of its values, issues, and strategies. Founded in 2007, J Street embraces Zionism, as it “organizes and mobilizes pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who want Israel to be secure, democratic and the national home of the Jewish people” (J Street 2019). However, J Street is distinct from establishment organizations that embrace

‘blanket’ support for Israel; the organization questions Israeli and American policies that go against the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and a future two-state solution. By recognizing Israel as a Jewish national home while also promoting the values of peace, democracy, and co-existence, J Street straddles the values of universalism and particularism. In recent years, the organization has attracted Democratic presidential primary candidates to speak at its annual national conference—many of whom previously would have likely supported AIPAC instead; this choice might depict an evolving Democratic party that is now more critical of Israel.

The existing literature on recent changes within American Jewish politics, especially related to Israel, approaches the subject in three different ways. One approach understands these changes through the lens of ‘critical engagement:’ critique and questioning of Israel and related policies are driven out of care for the future of the Jewish state (Waxman 2017, 181). Another approach views young American Jews’ criticism of Israel and their increasing disinterest in traditional institutions with pro-Israel policies as indicating a growing culture of indifference (Beinart 2010). Meanwhile, the third approach interprets these changes as a part of a broader trend towards embracing the values of social justice and *tikkun olam* (or repairing the world) over others like Zionism); these values are what have driven many American Jews to criticize the actions of the Israeli government, and American Jewish institutions unwavering support for Israel (Omer 2019) (Barnett 2017). My research explores these three threads, and places them in conversation with my organizational analysis, to show why, how, and to what extent changes to American Jewish life are taking place.

My thesis explores how the rise of President Trump, and the resulting unprecedented changes in American political culture, has affected American Jewish life. The lack of recent and comprehensive survey data since the 2016 election means that my methodology necessarily focuses on understanding interest group representation after 2016. Although both the groups that I explore in opposition to AIPAC and the broader establishment were founded prior to the election, these groups have mobilized significantly following the election. The growing array of American Jewish interest groups, particularly on the left and far-left, and their increasing popularity among American Jews since 2016 should not be overlooked. My research tries to understand the extent to which these changes are connected to broader changes in American society, particularly the massive mobilization of political movements on the left to resist Trump's policies, as opposed to the previously existing internal trends within American Jewish political life. My research question is thus important not only to American Jews but also has implications for and may relay broader changes within American society.

## **Methodology**

To understand how monumental changes within American politics have affected American Jewish life, I compare the values, strategies, and issues of AIPAC, INN, J Street. I chose to study these three organizations as opposed to others for three reasons. First, they are all engaging on similar topics: the American Jewish relationship to Israel. Second, existing literature depicts to some extent the changes within these three organizations; for AIPAC this has meant challenge and for the others, this has meant growth in membership and popularity. Third, each organization's mission and actions

provide a clear depiction of the different categories of American Jewish organization values and issues.

After describing the values, strategies, and issues of each organization, I explore how fundamental changes in American politics since the 2016 election have impacted each organization. I rely upon existing literature in order to find evidence for, interpret, and understand the recent internal changes within each of the three American Jewish organizational case studies. To understand and depict how these organizations view themselves, I use the organizations' websites and other primary source materials wherever possible. I also utilize journal articles and other recent literature that help fill in the gaps to depict changes within these three organizations.

## **Roadmap**

In the following chapter, I conduct a literature review that provides the theoretical framework for my argument surrounding the significant changes to American Jewish organizational life since the 2016 election through contextualizing these changes among the previously existing trends and divisions within American Jewish politics. Chapter three discusses how the positive and negative Jewish responses to recent changes in Jewish Israel-politics are representative of Jews' excitement or anxiety at aspects of their faith being influenced by the modern world. I also explore the differences between Jewish Israel-related organizations, present a framework to differentiate between three groups of organizations, and delve into three case study organizations. Chapter four then analyzes how changes within American political culture have directly impacted AIPAC, IfNotNow, and J Street. I look at how broad changes within American politics have

affected mainstream politics and public opinion on Israel, and in turn how this has impacted each organizations' ability to mobilize American Jews and promote their own belief system regarding the American Jewish relationship to Israel.

My conclusion argues that the three case studies illuminate the very apparent and recent changes to American Jewish life. These changes were a result of previously existing trends, including generational differences, that were then accelerated by the 2016 election. These shifts in political opinions and representation need to be recognized and grappled with by American Jewish leaders. These effects are also significant on American politics by serving as an example of how the 2016 election affected minority, religious, and affinity groups.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

My thesis explores the research question: How have fundamental changes in America's political culture shaped American Jews' political stances and affected the representation of viewpoints within American Jewish interest groups? This research query views the recent changes within American political life as an independent variable. I seek to understand to what extent this variable has catalyzed changes within Jewish political culture. In particular, I discern to what extent the changes in American politics since the 2016 election have affected American organizational life, such as catalyzing membership growth in certain organizations or creating challenges to an organization's values. Exploring changes within American Jewish organizations helps indicate that one or both of the following phenomena have occurred: first, that American Jewish political viewpoints are evolving; second, that American Jews have mobilized into new and diverse organizations that better represent the diversity of viewpoints.

This chapter examines the extent to which the existing debates in literature recognize these changes and what theories are presented and deployed to explain why those changes occurred. While some authors, consistent with the argument developed in this thesis, point to Trump as an important catalyst of change within American Jewish life, others either reject or question that there have been any changes altogether. Much of the literature points to other variables as responsible for effecting American Jewish life,

such as a fundamental change in the Jewish condition or prioritization of liberal values. While these variables were necessary preconditions, the rise of Trump was a key catalyst of this effect. My empirical analysis in later chapters of organizational changes contributes to current debates by presenting evidence that the election of Trump, and the subsequent political polarization and progressive protests in response his election, furthered previously existing schisms and trends within Jewish American politics. This chapter provides an exhaustive literature review to describe how prominent authors understand the extent to which changes have occurred and the variable responsible for these changes.

### *Argument*

There is minimal survey data that presents evidence for or against the fact that American Jews' political opinions or willingness to mobilize regarding Israel has changed over time; however, recent challenges and/or growth since 2016 within three prominent American Jewish organizations engaged from many angles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict illustrates how the 2016 election catalyzed changes in American Jewish political life. American political trends—among them the rise of Trump, political polarization, and schisms within the Democratic party—should not be interpreted as solely responsible for these changes but rather should be understood as having accelerated what were already existing variables and discord within American Jewish life previously. These variables are elaborated further within this chapter and demonstrate the already existing features at play prior to the 2016 election.



## **Distancing**

This section examines the debate around whether there have been significant changes to American Jewish life, specifically whether American Jews are becoming more distanced from Israel. These works frame a response to my research question around a shifting Jewish attachment to Israel. Later in this chapter, I explore this research question from an angle that does not place attachment to Israel at the center, but rather understands how a shift in values contributed to overall changes to American Jewish life today.

For decades, American Jews have debated the meaning, significance, and potential consequence of the data that shows that “American Jews, especially younger ones, are becoming less attached to Israel” (Waxman 2017, 179). American Jewish sociologists have presented two “distancing hypothesis” concerning this phenomenon that question the extent to which American “distancing from Israel has or has not been occurring in American Jewish society” (Sheskin 2012, 27). I have chosen to explore these “distancing” hypotheses as they are the lens through which existing literature has approached my research question, thereby helping to place my argument in conversation with existing literature.

The first hypothesis, or “life-cycle” effect, states that younger Jews are less attached than older Jews, yet as they grow older they will become more attached, thus mitigating any future changes in the total overall attachment (Sasson, Phillips, Wright, Kadushin, and Saxe 2012, 67). This relies on the basic assumption that as we age “our political attitudes and behavior change in highly predictable ways—we become more conservative, clannish, and concerned with our immediate (and primordial) community” (Barnett 2016, 204).

The second hypothesis, or “generational effect,” disagrees with the first hypothesis; rather it argues that the younger generation will not grow in their attachment over time, thereby leading to an overall future decrease in the attachment to Israel (Sheskin 2012, 27). These hypotheses frame the differences in attachment between younger and older generations as either a “life-cycle” or “generational” effect (Sasson, Phillips, Wright, Kadushin, and Saxe 2012, 67).

### *The Life-Cycle Effect*

While there is a range of surveys and polls that show that American Jewish attachment to Israel has remained relatively stagnant, the reliability and accuracy of this data is questionable. Prominent American Jewish sociologists, including Theodore Sasson, Leonard Saxe, and others, have argued that a “preponderance of evidence supports the view that emotional attachment to Israel increased over the life course rather than declined across the generations” (Sasson, Phillips, Wright, Kadushin, and Saxe 2012, 67). The Pew Research Center 2013 Survey and the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey discussed earlier does provide findings that align with this hypothesis, illustrating that young American Jews showed less attachment than that of those older generations at the time.

I agree with Michael Barnett that the data regarding distancing has “real limitations” (Waxman 2018, 475). Barnett points to the difficulties in understanding what it means for a respondent to describe themselves as pro-Israel or anti-Israel, as there is a broad diversity of positions that could fall into either of these categories, regarding the peace process, settlement expansion, Israeli security, the right for Palestinian statehood, and the list continues (Waxman 2018, 475). Moreover, I second Barnett’s appeal to

question the reliability of survey data in general on this topic, for the results can be easily changed or manipulated depending upon question-wording, sequencing, and the overall survey pool (Waxman 2018, 475).

My organizational analyses in chapters three and four provide evidence against the life-cycle effect. My analysis confirms the generational hypothesis—that young American Jews have and continue to grow more distant from Israel over time. Survey data alone cannot prove that the first hypothesis is true. However, the growth of Jewish progressive and center-left movements, founded by and/or engaging young Jewish Americans, reveal that this generation of young Jewish Americans is fundamentally different than those from previous generations. By drawing upon an organization analysis as opposed to survey data, my thesis helps to disprove the first hypothesis. The generational effect has been furthered by changes within American politics since 2016. The later sections in this chapter regarding the unique attributes young Jewish Americans, as well as an increasingly fractured Israeli American relationship and vision for a Jewish future, also serve as evidence that young American Jews will not increase their attachment to Israel with age.

The next subsection describes the primary differences in generational memories between older and younger generations of American Jews today that are likely responsible for ‘distancing;’ the next section about young Jewish Americans today, also contributes evidence that this generation is fundamentally different from those generations that came before it, meaning that their attachment to Israel will not increase with time.

*Generational memories*

The different generational memories are partially responsible for distancing in emotional attachment to Israel. Sociologists who support the “generational” hypothesis believe that the age-related difference is bound to lead to an “intergenerational decline;” the eldest generation will inevitably be replaced by those generations that come after it (Cohen and Kelman 2007, 2). Moreover, not only will there be an inevitable replacement, but also that future generations do not share the same lived experiences and memories of those generations prior.

The oldest generations are most familiar with a narrative of Judaism surrounding victimhood because they are more likely to have been present during periods of overt discrimination, such as the Holocaust, and the formation of Israel in 1948. Their experience of Israel is most clearly defined by a long history of Jewish persecution culminating in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tragedy of the Holocaust. According to a 2012 survey, 68 percent of American Jews aged over sixty describes the Holocaust as a very important Jewish experience that has impacted political beliefs, compared to the 41 percent of American Jews aged between 18 to 39 who agree (Jones and Cox 2012, 7). Thus, American Jews who were born before World War II, or in its aftermath, have an understanding of Judaism that has been shaped by suffering from violent and prevalent anti-Semitism. Many see the founding of the modern state of Israel as a redemption from the previous state of wandering and uncertainty about their survival. For members of the Baby Boomer generation, their opinions of Israel have been shaped by memories of the Six-Day War in 1967 in which Israel succeeded in fighting five of its neighbors. The 1967 war also served as an important turning point in American Jewish history; it is widely assumed to be the “high-water mark of American Jewry’s support for Israel”

(Barnett 2016, 199). These memories shape the perceptions of Israel for the oldest generations today, continuing to view Israel as the underdog ‘David’ from the biblical story of David and Goliath.

Meanwhile, the youngest generations of American Jews hold very different memories of Israel. While many have been exposed to the narratives of the generations prior through Jewish youth institutions, such as day schools, youth groups, and Sunday schools, they have not lived through similar historical experiences as generations prior. Daniel Gordis, an American-born Israeli thinker, wrote in his recent book *We Stand Divided* about the incredible differences between how young American Jews came together during times of conflict in Israel during the 1970s versus today. For example, he juxtaposed his experiences as a child at a Jewish summer camp in 1976 during the hijacking of an Air France plane on route from Tel Aviv to Paris with that of the critical response from a group of young Jews during the 2014 war. In 1976, hundreds of campers gathered together to celebrate when Israel’s strong-armed response to the hijacking led to the release of 102 of 106 hostages (Gordis 2019, 11-12). Likewise, in the summer of 2014, during the violence of Operation Protective Edge, a group of young American Jews (that would later form the organization IfNotNow) came together to demand that Israel “stop the war on Gaza, end the occupation, and freedom and dignity of all;” as Gordis points out, their demands had no mention of the simultaneously occurring Hamas-led war on Israel (Gordis 2019, 12-13).

Sociologists Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman described the events that likely shaped the memories Jews born in the years following 1974: The First Lebanon War in 1982, the First Intifada, the Second Intifada, and the Second Lebanon War. Cohen and

Kelman argue that the moral and political complexity of these events means that younger generations are thus “less likely to cast Israel in a positive, let alone heroic light” (Cohen and Kelman 2007, 3). Moreover, the lack of clear, genuine, and believable efforts at creating peace in Israel-Palestine may also shape the youngest generation’s memories. Although there were some efforts at creating peace and stability, such as Camp David II in 2000, these efforts have all largely failed, and have often devolved into violence, particularly with the Second Intifada from late 2000 through 2005. As Jonathan Weisman described, “younger American Jews do not typically remember Israel as the David against regional Goliaths. They see a bully, armed and indifferent, 45 years past the Yom Kippur War, the last conflict that threatened Israel’s existence” (Weisman 2019). Gordis similarly echoed that they have known no other Israel than that of the “start-up nation”: “powerful, stable, (seemingly) invulnerable...the reason that the Palestinians live such unfortunate lives” (Gordis 2019, 33).

### **Young Jewish Americans Today**

Beyond distinct generational memories, the recent changes to American Jewish life are a product of the major demographic differences between young American Jews and older generations. While there are several distinguishable differences, among the most impactful are the much higher rates of intermarriage in Jewish society, the multifaceted technological capabilities that have shaped the way people interact and gain knowledge, and, most importantly, the embrace of liberal values.<sup>2</sup> Many of these distinct

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<sup>2</sup> Although these differences have been most impactful to the youngest generations of American Jews, their effect has not solely been limited to the youngest population.

qualities are also limited to non-Orthodox Jews who make up around 89% of the Jewish population under 30 (Pew Research Center 2013, 49).

Young American Jews today live in both a Jewish and secular society dissimilar to that of generations prior. Overall, Jewish communities have followed in the footsteps of broader American society and have grown more secular—an outcome that is likely both the product and the result of higher rates of intermarriage. Since the 1970s, rates of intermarriage among Jews have increased dramatically; between 2005 and 2013, nearly six-in-ten of the net American Jewish population married a non-Jewish spouse, compared to just 17% before 1970. Intermarriage has occurred almost exclusively in non-Orthodox communities as only 2% have a non-Jewish spouse (Pew Research Center 2013, 9). As a result, younger American Jews today are much more likely than the generation of their parents to be from a family of intermarried parents. Waxman describes how this has “undoubtedly” impacted the young American Jews whose parents are intermarried: they are more liberal and significantly less attached to Israel (Waxman 2016, 137).

The rapid technological innovations available to Jewish Americans at a young age are also a primary generational difference. They not only have quick and easy access to information but also are exposed to a wide variety of viewpoints through social media. Social media platforms also make it easier for people across the country or world to connect with one another and share ideas. In the past, the information that youths might receive about issues, such as the Israeli-Arab conflict, would have been more limited. Without the depth and breadth of easily accessible information online, it was more difficult to question the narrative that the Jewish establishment shared about Israel. Since Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a widely contested issue today, one does not have to look far

or hard to find a multitude of opinions. American Jewish organizations, particularly those with a young and liberal membership, have used social media to their advantage.

Organizations can harness social media as a tool to not only share their ideas but also to reach and mobilize individuals who they otherwise would have difficulty connecting with. By making it easier to share content, advertise for events, and gain membership, social media has played a role in helping to revolutionize American Jewish life.

Young Jewish Americans' liberal political views have also largely affected their perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The overall Jewish population is nearly twice as liberal as the total United States population. Even still, young Jewish adults are more liberal and less conservative than older cohorts. According to a 2019 Jewish electorate study at Brandeis, Jews ages 18-34 were 50% liberal and only 14% conservative, compared to Jews ages 65+ who are 36% liberal and 27% conservative (Saxe, Tighe, Kramer, Parmer, Nussbaum, Kallista, and Seabrum 2019). In fact, young American Jews are more liberal than non-Jewish Americans of the same age.

Many of the factors mentioned have also made young American Jews more acquainted with and sympathetic to the Palestinian narrative. Social media has helped expose American Jews to Palestinian's perspective. Yet, the most important aspect is young Jewish American's largely liberal identity. Today's most widespread and successful social justice movements—from the Women's March to Black Lives Matter—use “intersectional activism,” meaning that they support “a wide variety of issues, including discrimination by sex, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, nationality, disability, religion and other marginalized statuses” (Heany 2019). Among intersectional issues is support for the Palestinian people's struggle for freedom, justice, and equality



through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS). BDS is a highly controversial movement, particularly on college campuses, that works to “end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law” (BDS 2020). For American Jews who also are pro-Israel, supporting these social movements means grappling with how the BDS movement aligns with their other values.

The many differences mentioned that make young Jewish Americans' identity and experiences fundamentally different from generations prior presents evidence against the first distancing hypothesis, or the *Life-Cycle Effect*. Beyond the generational distinctions discussed in this section, American and Israeli Jewish communities have groups that are increasingly disparate. This trend is interlinked with the growing generational differences between younger and older Americans such that the increasingly liberal beliefs, secular practices, and universalist perception of Jewish life have come into conflict with Israeli Jews' religious, cultural, and political sentiments.

### **“Twin Portraits”: American and Israeli Jews**

The changes within the American Jewish community are not solely internal; rather, they are a product of the growing divide between American and Israeli Jews. Among recent literature, many authors have approached the changes within American Jewish life through the lens of a struggling relationship between American and Israeli Jews today. For example, Alon Pinkas' article titled “Sorry Israel, US Jewry just isn't that into you” described the waning of a 30 year “love affair” (Pinkas 2017, 1). After serving for 30 years as a unifying cause, the reign of a unique Israeli-American relationship has grown precarious. American Jews' embrace of liberal values stands at

odds with the “intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” decades of occupation, and an Israeli dismissal of Reform and Conservative identity, an identity that comprises 80% of the American Jewish community (Pinkas 2017, 2).

Two recent books similarly echo the role of Israel in an American Jewish divide. Daniel Gordis’ (2019) book *We Stand Divided* argued that the “split between American Jews and Israel was causing a *split within* the American Jewish community” (Gordis 2019, 21). While one group of American Jews has grown “exasperated” with Israel, another group of “right-of-center” American Jews has grown “exasperated” with the first group, creating internal American Jewish conflict. Dov Waxman’s (2016) book *Trouble in the Tribe* shares similar concerns, exploring the increasingly contentious place of Israel within American Jewish society. The recent polarization within American Jewish life stems from a growing group of American Jews disenfranchised and dissatisfied with Israel’s right-wing policies, especially as it relates to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and treatment of the Palestinian people.

The ideological differences between the two largest Jewish population centers plays a central role in this divide. The personal affinity or ‘bond’ between the two groups should not be ignored; nearly 4-in-10 American Jews have visited at least once, and many with family spanning the two nations. Nonetheless, the two populations live in vastly different societies. Unlike their American Jewish counterparts who are approximately 50% liberal, nearly 4-in-10 Israeli Jews identify as politically right-wing (Pew Research Center 2013, 96). American Jews live in a diverse and majority-Christian society, whereas Israeli Jews live in a majority Jewish population (Pew Research Center 2017).

The Pew Research Center's 2017 "Twin Portraits" also demonstrated the two group's diverging understandings of what being Judaism means to them:

Americans are far more likely than Israelis to say that pursuing ethics, morality and justice in society, as well as displaying "intellectual curiosity" and having a "good sense of humor," are essential to what being Jewish means to them. Israeli Jews, meanwhile, more commonly highlight observance of Jewish law and a connection to Jewish history, culture or community (Pew Research Center 2017).

The differing religious affiliations are also an important distinction. As discussed in chapter 1, nearly half of American Jews affiliate as Conservative or Reform; both affiliations' religious practices are designed to accommodate living and socializing in the modern-day and outside of the Jewish community. Although half of Israeli Jewish society is secular, non-Orthodox American Jews hold religious, cultural, and political beliefs that clash with the other half of Israeli Jews made up of Masorti (traditional), Dati (religious Zionists), or Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews. For example, the Datiim holds political views that "entwine religious identity and nationalism," "identify with the right [wing], to favor Jewish settlements in the West Bank and to say Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel" (Pew Research Center 2017).

The conflict between American Jews and Israel as well as that within Jewish American society can be understood as a quarrel over two visions of how Jews exist in the world. As presented in the introduction, the opposing values of "particularism" and "universalism" create different movements and visions of what it means to be a Jew. This same conflict of values is wrapped up in the state of Israel's history and laws. Defined as a Jewish, democratic state, Israel's politics and identity travels between two poles: a homeland for the Jewish people and a thriving western 'democracy.' In recent years, the

pendulum has swung closer towards a particularistic Jewish vision for Israel. One example that depicts this trend is that, in 2018, the Israeli government passed the nation-state law, protecting and guaranteeing the democratic rights of only its Jewish citizens. For the parts of American Jewish society that support a “universalist” vision of Judaism defined by support for diversity and freedom for all, Israel’s actions and policies stand opposed to their values. As Gordis describes, “it is, in short, not an Israel they can love or support. If anything, it is Israel that they must resist” (Gordis 2019, 25). American Jewish differences are therefore fueled by disagreeing values and are only furthered as Israel takes ‘particularistic actions’ that directly affect a potential future Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The broad diversity of practices and beliefs within both American and Israeli populations means that it is difficult to understand how and if these two groups are moving closer or further apart. However, this section, and the section prior regarding young Jewish Americans, presents evidence that the Israeli-American relationship is evolving. The connection between these two factors—the growing generational differences of young Jewish Americans and dissimilar experiences of American and Israeli Jews—can not and should not be ignored. American Jews (particularly younger populations) increasing criticism and dissatisfaction with Israeli policies, Israeli Jews’ particularistic interpretation of Judaism, and American Jewish systems that lend unwavering support to the Israeli government indicate that broader changes to American Jewish life have begun to take form.

## **What Changes Have Taken Place?**

Two factors serve as a precondition for the changes in American Jewish life today: first, young Jewish Americans live in a world different than generations prior; Second, Israeli and American visions of Judaism are continuously growing apart. The fundamental changes within American politics since 2016 do not serve as the cause of the changes to American Jewish life today; rather the multitude of ways in which American politics has evolved—provoking widespread polarization, evoking a left-progressive divide within the Democratic Party, reshaping altogether the values of the Republic Party, and shaping diplomatic norms around the American Presidency—has brought forward the already existing variables of change within American Jewish political life, particularly on the issue of Israel. Prior to 2016, new and alternative organizations were already founded and growing in popularity. Nonetheless, alterations to American politics, leading to the rise and popularity of progressive movements and leaders as well as the decreasing popularity of bipartisanship, accelerated the growth and popularity of left-leaning movements and challenged group's ability to maintain bipartisanship.

Since these trends started far before the rise of Trump, and were instead accelerated by the 2016 election, American Jewish political thinkers have long debated and upheld disagreeing visions that describe how and to what extent decreasing American Jewish attachment to Israel has taken place. While some authors believe that young American Jews' criticism of Israel and their increasing disinterest in traditional institutions with pro-Israel policies indicates a culture of indifference, others point to this criticism as a sign that young Jewish Americans are continuing to engage with Israel but in new and critical ways. While these theories represent the changing attachments for

some groups of young Jews, they do not fully encapsulate what is happening in rapidly growing progressive Jewish movements, particularly IfNotNow. This section will compare these two initial theories with Atalia Omer's argument in *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*. Omer's theory best illustrates how the root of criticism from the Jewish far left and progressive movements today stems from an "indignation against injustice done in their name" by Israel, and how communal protests for Palestinian Solidarity have led to a reimagination of Jewishness (Omer 2019). Growing criticism of Israel stems from a reimagination of Jewishness with the value of social justice at the center informing their solidarity with Palestinians. Each of these three theories presents an important part of the picture surrounding the most pertinent changes to American Jewish life today.

### *Indifference*

The first theory understands the changes within American Jewish life as a result of the growing culture of indifference towards Israel among young Jews. One proponent is Peter Beinart, a professor of journalism and political science at the City University of New York. In his much discussed and highly controversial New York Review of Books article "The Failure of the American Jewish establishment," Beinart presented evidence that young American Jews have grown indifferent to Israel. He began the article by pointing to a 2003 study by pollster Frank Luntz who was hired by Jewish philanthropies to explain why Jewish college students were not more "vigorously rebutting campus criticism of Israel" (Beinart 2010, 1). Luntz's study found that in the six times that Jewish youth were brought together to talk about their Jewishness and connection to Israel, every time "the topic of Israel did not come up until it was prompted. Six times these Jewish

youth used the word ‘*they*’ rather than ‘*us*’ to describe the situation” (quoted in Beinart 2010). By drawing upon this study and others, Beinart sought to lend support for his theory that there is a growing culture of indifference to Israel among young Jews.

Beinart also claimed that major American Jewish organizations’ refusal to defend democracy in the Jewish state is alienating many young liberal Jews from Zionism itself—a point elaborated in his 2012 book *The Crisis of Zionism*. The policies of organizations like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, according to Beinart, are responsible for this effect. The establishment’s policy of ‘blanket’ support for Israel stands opposed to young Jews liberal vision of Zionism—a vision that both upholds democratic ideals and serves as a safeguard for the Jewish people—and their desire for an “open and frank” discussion surrounding how this vision falls short.

I agree with Beinart that the heart of this disagreement is rooted in the “defining values of American Jewish political culture,” these being “a belief in open debate, a skepticism about military force, [and] a commitment to human rights” (Beinart 2010). However, I believe that describing the effect of such policies as a growing culture of indifference does not fully encapsulate the changes to American Jewish life today. Instead, I believe that young Jews’ embrace of liberal values, and the conflict of these values with establishment policies, have inspired many different types of reactions. These different types of reactions can be seen through the formation of organizations that run counter to the traditional center-right- and right-wing establishment organizations’ policies. The following subsections on *critical engagement* and *Jewish reimagination*, and the examples presented within my case study chapters of many types of Jewish

organizations, illustrate how the increasing prominence of liberal values have inspired several reactions among American Jews today.

### *Critical Engagement*

While Dov Waxman agrees with Beinart that Jewish organizations serve as “intellectual bodyguards for Israeli leaders who threaten the very liberal values they profess to admire” (Beinart 2016, 1), he disagrees with Beinart’s assessment of how American Jews have reacted. Waxman does not believe that “young American Jews are emotionally detached and disconnected from Israel” (Waxman 2017). Waxman (2017) instead argues that young Jews are actually “more engaged with Israel than their predecessors,” yet are also more critical. He believes that criticism should be viewed as a form of engagement, not disengagement. (Waxman 2017, 177). Waxman describes these changes as a form of ‘critical engagement’ with Israel and argues that it is a manifestation of “attachment, not alienation” with Israel (Waxman 2017, 181).

Waxman’s *critical engagement* argument can be contextualized by evidence that, for American Jews, criticism of Israel is not an entirely new nor unaccepted phenomenon. The 2013 Pew Research Center poll found that 89% of the net Jewish population surveyed believed that being strongly critical of Israel is compatible with being Jewish (Pew Research Center 2013, 58). Moreover, Jews overall, not only the youngest population, have grown more critical of Israel: 42% of American Jews said that Trump favors Israel too much, a number far greater than is true for Catholics and Christians (Smith 2019). Waxman points to similar reasons to those mentioned in my section on *Young American Jews* as to why younger generations have grown more critical, arguing that young Jews are more liberal, more oriented towards universalism than older



generations, that the Holocaust and anti-Semitism have had less of an impact on their lives, and that they hold different “generational” memories (Waxman 2017, 178). The growing differences between Israel and America, described in the *Twin Portraits* Section, are also responsible for growing criticism.

While I agree with Waxman that for some American Jews criticism has been a form of engagement, I believe that these changes have more to do with the increasing central importance of *tikkun olam*, and less to do with attachment to Israel. Growing criticism of Israel by young Jews’ should be primarily understood not through the lens of ‘love’ or ‘care’ for Israel (or critical engagement) but rather should be construed as rooted in an embrace of Jewish values of universalism and practice of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world. American Jews’ growing criticism of Israel are a product of the liberal values that compels them to do so, as opposed to an attachment to the holy land.

Michael Barnett’s (2016) *The Stars and the Stripes* provides a foundation to understand the historical roots of *tikkun olam* and its increasing importance to American Jewish identity today. Barnett describes how, prior to 1960, the term *tikkun olam* was hardly mentioned. The term started circulating starting in 1970 and, in the decades following, became incorporated into Conservative Judaism’s statement of principles, as well as in the 1990s became well-known in Jewish households across America. *Tikkun olam* differs from other similar Jewish terms like *zedakah*, or justice, that are “often associated with giving to one’s own,” for it is generally assumed to refer to “giving to non-Jews” (Barnett 2016, 219). This differentiates the former action as closer in line with cosmopolitanism and the later with tribal values (Barnett 2016, 219)

### *Reimagination of Jewishness*

Omer's argument builds upon existing literature that demonstrates how *tikkun olam* now serves a more central role today among American Jews by researching how young Jews' liberal values have led them to Palestinian Solidarity, ultimately resulting in a reimagination of their Jewishness. Omer conducted sociological research through interviews with 70 Jewish American Palestinian solidarity activists, engaged across four progressive Jewish activist groups—Open Hillel, INN, Center for Jewish Non-violence, and Jewish Voices for Peace. Omer found that Jewish Palestinian Solidarity movements are both the outcome of changes in American Jewish life, as well as serve as a continuous catalyst for the rethinking of a transformation of what it means to be Jewish. Her theory goes beyond Waxman and Beinart to understand decreasing attachment to Israel instead around the growth of liberal values among young Jewish Americans.

All three theories discussed provide an important piece to the larger picture of what is happening in American Jewish life today. Young American Jews today are far less willing to accept the establishment's narrative around Israel. They instead seek to openly discuss where and how Israel's policies (and their American backing by American politicians and Jewish leaders) fall short of a vision of a liberal, democratic Jewish state. Young Jews are much more willing and open than preceding generations to criticize the Jewish state in these ways. This is likely due to a broad combination of factors including generational differences, liberal values, and Israel's much more privileged and powerful position today. While some Jews certainly have grown indifferent to Israel, and others criticize Israel out of love, the most interesting and significant trend that has arisen is the increasing presence and growth of Jewish social justice and Palestinian solidarity

movements. The growth of these movements is interesting for two reasons. First, they constitute a new trend in American Jewish life with relation to attachment to Israel. Second, the rise of these Jewish anti-occupation movements has also contributed to new forms of Jewish practice and life through integrating religious and cultural practices into their activism.

I will build upon these insights to do an empirical analysis of recent changes in the organizational life of American Jews. My case studies depict the extent to which changes in American politics have contributed, effected, or motivated trends towards indifference, critical engagement, and/or the reimagination of Jewishness through Palestinian solidarity activism. I argue that political trends in the United States since 2016 towards party polarization and internal shifts within the Democratic party have challenged the establishment institution's ability to appeal to young progressive Jews. Changes in American politics have also encouraged some young Jewish Americans to critically engage with Israel through "Liberal Zionist" organizations or to engage in Palestinian Solidarity activism through "Anti-Occupation" organizations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter responded to the longstanding debate among American Jewish intellectuals and community members surrounding whether young American Jews are distancing themselves from Israel or growing less attached. I have shown that a number of factors have led young Jews today to embrace a universalist vision of Judaism—a vision that is compatible with and motivates their liberal identities and *tikkun olam* actions. Young Jews not only grew up in a world vastly different than older generations

but also the position Israel holds on the international stage has evolved dramatically from an underdog to a powerful, and often aggressive, state. These interconnected factors make it highly unlikely that, with age, younger generations' attachment to Israel will grow over time. Instead the impact of these factors, in conjunction with recent changes in American politics, requires further examination.

Many American Jewish sociologists and political scientists have begun to recognize that changes are occurring and have questioned what this change looks like. This chapter presented three theories that seek to describe and understand how American Jewish life has changed: a growing culture of indifference surrounding Israel, engaging with Israel through criticism, or mobilizing against Israel for Palestinian Solidarity. Each of these theories is significant, painting just one part of a larger image of the many different reactions that have taken place. Despite different understandings of how American Jewish life is changing, all three theories to some extent—and especially Atalia Omer—recognize young Jews' embrace of liberal values as central to transformations in Jewish attachment to Israel. In the chapters following, I depict how recent changes within American political life, specifically the rise of Trump, have impacted different segments of American Jewish life.

## **Jewish Organizational Life**

### **Introduction**

To understand the changes within American Jewish life today, I examine Jewish organizational life and history to provide a context and background that helps depict the recent changes and the diversity of internal organizational responses. While this chapter begins by broadly discussing the vast number and diversity of American Jewish organizations, later I narrow in by delving deeper into organizations whose mission and purpose relates to Israel and/or the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. I present a framework of Israel-related American Jewish organizations to elucidate the similarities and differences between three groups of organizations. Each case study organization represents a larger group of similarly minded institutions, so this chapter presents the history and background of the three case study organizations—AIPAC, IfNotNow, and J Street—to set the stage for analysis within chapter four.

### **Organizational Life**

American Jewish organizational life has a rich history and diversity, and today is made up of over 17,500 organizations (Barnett 2016, 40). Among these organizations are a broad spectrum of missions, purposes, members, and other distinguishing factors, providing spaces for the similarly diverse spectrum of American Jews' political, religious, and cultural beliefs. One way to break down these organizations is to look at

the distinct purposes they serve in Jewish communities across America. Some organizations serve a primarily religious role, others provide volunteer opportunities, function as a cultural home, engage youth, or fight against anti-Semitism, among others.

The American Jewish Yearbook (AJYB) serves as a helpful analytical tool, annually “document[ing] the institutional infrastructure of the North American Jewish community” (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 579). The AJYM systematically categorizes the nearly 800 national Jewish organizations into 40+ categories: Denominational, Age-Related (Adult, Youth, Children, and College Aged), Israel-Related Philanthropy-Promoting, Holocaust, Academic, Fraternities/Sororities, National Origin, Social Welfare, among others (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 579-580). Although each organization is placed into a specific category, the editors’ note states that “many organizations could easily fit in multiple categories” and that the “inclusion of an organization does not imply that the editors share the viewpoints espoused by that organization” (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 281).

The editors’ note and the vast number overall of national organizations illustrates two trends in American Jewish life today. First, American Jewish organizations often play a multitude of roles in the lives of Jewish individuals. For example, a Jewish Denomination organization, like the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism or Union for Reform Judaism, often provides a space not only for prayer, but also engages its members in a wide range of cultural practices; it likely also promotes a particular set of beliefs and values around what it means to live a Jewish life, such as praying in Synagogue every Saturday or supporting Israel. Second, while there are an extensive number of organizations, some of these organizations are more or less accepted among

traditional and mainstream Jews and Jewish institutions. For example, mainstream organizations may reject the practices of newer and/or unconventional organizations, for they do not view these organizations practices or beliefs as essentially Jewish. Likewise, members of newer and/or unconventional organizations may similarly reject or criticize the practices of more traditional American Jewish organizations. This disagreement is part of a larger debate among American Jewish sociologists and scholars as to whether modern adaptations of traditional religious, cultural, and political modern are positive or negative changes. This lack of consensus is important to my research on American Jewish interest groups, for American Jews espouse conflicting beliefs as to whether the growing number of Israel-related interest groups, which disagree with traditional American Jewish institutions, are a beneficial development.

#### *Tradition versus Transformation*

The disagreement as to whether recent changes within American Jewish organizational life are positive or negative applies directly to my research question, informing much of the debate around whether the substance of American Jewish life is weakening or strengthening upon its encounter with the modern world. Over the last six years, far-left leaning groups have emerged that disagree with the views of traditional American Jewish interest groups who see supporting Israel as an essential Jewish practice. The growth or mobilization of these groups has sparked controversy surrounding what light to view these evolving and modern American Jewish practices. Later in this chapter, I present a framework that will depict how three different and disagreeing camps of American Jewish Israel-related organizations promote either breaking or keeping with tradition.

Traditionalists and transformationalists disagree as to whether evolving Jewish life and practices to the modern world is good or bad. Traditionalists see the modern world as “inherently threatening to Judaism;” interactions with other cultures have led to new forms and practices that stray from or disagree with essential forms of Jewishness (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 10). Meanwhile, transformationalists look more favorably on how the conditions of the modern world impacts Judaism, providing the opportunity for “developing new forms of Judaism and Jewishness” (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 10). These different world views mean that traditionalists and transformationalists “derive very different conclusions from the same facts” (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 8). Transformationalists take an optimistic approach to changes in American Jewish life. For example, they do not see declines in Jewish involvement as a reason to worry; modern substitutes have replaced Jewish practices of the past provide an opportunity and thus are not a reason for despair. Meanwhile, traditionalists are worried when they see trends that Jews are “direction of less Jewish intensiveness, of greater integration into American society, and of more remoteness from other Jews, ritual practice, and organized Jewry” (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 10). They believe pessimistically that trends of disengagement from traditional forms of Jewish organization and ritual practice constitute a threat to the authentic practice of Judaism.

The traditionalist and transformationalist interpretations provide a broader structure to understand disagreement among American Jews over how to approach the development of new organizations and forms of Jewish practice. Traditionalists would look negatively upon evidence of a diversifying body of organizations, whereas transformationalists would look optimistically upon these changes as an opportunity to



develop new Jewish practices and forms. My thesis specifically seeks to understand how recent changes in American political culture have affected American Jewish political life. The two interpretations of traditionalism and transformationalism are relevant to my research question, for they constitute the two opposing American Jewish reactions to evidence that American Jewish life today is evolving in response to changes stemming from the secular, outside world.

### **Israel-related organizations**

This section narrows on Jewish Israel-related organizations within American Jewish life and presents a framework by which to categorize the growing diversity of organizations. When modern Jewish American pro-Israel interest groups were founded around the late 1960s there was very little diversity in viewpoints among these organizations. Over time, many new organizations were founded which espouse views that often disagreed with the more traditional and mainstream institutions by engaging more critically with Israel. This section discusses how these newer organizations differ from the older and traditional mainstream organizations. I then classify American Jewish Israel-related organizations into three categories.

The mobilization and growth of newer organizations, particularly those on the far-left who publicly criticize Israel, play an important role in shaping the power dynamic between American Jewish interest groups, challenging the power of the more traditional American Jewish establishment. Whereas transformationalists would look kindly upon these challenges to the status quo by new organizations who reform their practices to fit with the modern world, traditionalists would interpret challenge to traditional institutions

as “inherently threatening to Judaism” (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 10). To understand how new organizations have questioned the status of quo of American Jewish policy on Israel, and the previously widespread consensus presented and promoted by establishment organizations, I have empirically chosen to map Israel-related organizations into three different categories. Within each category, I also present the background, history, issues, and strategies of a respective case study organization.

### *The Erosion of Historical Consensus*

For the nearly 50 years since the 1967 war there was an apparent unanimity on Israel among the mainstream religious, cultural, and political American Jewish organizations. Following the 1967 war, “Israel was the great unifying cause of American Jewish politics,” bringing American Jews “physically and emotionally together” to march in the streets, fundraise, and lobby their elected officials in support of Israel (Waxman 2016, 120). This sense of solidarity brought American Jews a sense of unity and purpose that reigned across their religious, cultural and political communities. The 1967 War also inspired a cultural transition among American Jews with Israel at the center. The sense of having almost lost Israel entirely and the pride over the Jewish state’s victory reconfigured the role of Israel in American Jewish identity. Saying the right things about Israel became an unofficial requirement for American Jews to be accepted members of the Jewish community (Liebman 1973, 92).

One institution in particular, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CoP), demonstrates how many organizations banded together to create an apparent consensus on Jewish issues and, more specifically, support for Israel. CoP encompasses fifty-one of the most prominent and powerful modern American

Jewish organizations, among which are the largest national, denominational Jewish organizations—the Orthodox Union, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the Union for Reform Judaism (Conference of Presidents 2019). Since sixty-three percent of Jews today are denominationally Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, CoP therefore harnesses a large amount of power through its organizational members (Pew Research Center 2013, 10). The Conference also has member organizations whose primary purposes are not religious or cultural, but rather are to promote pro-Israel policies and strengthen the U.S. Israel relationship, such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA). While there has been some diversity of viewpoints among member organizations, CoP joined together and continues to unite member organizations to “advance the interests of the American Jewish community, sustain broad-based support for Israel and address the critical concerns facing world Jewry” (Conference of Presidents 2019). The larger institutions and many of its member organizations continue to maintain significant support today.

While in the past Israel brought American Jews together, this phenomenon no longer holds today; the American Jewish community’s conversations around Israel—and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict—have grown increasingly divided. A new and rising group of American Jews have mobilized around their beliefs, questioning Israel’s actions within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading to the creation of new organizations that then better represent their viewpoints. The existence and growth of these organizations (outside of the American Jewish establishment) call into question the previously accepted norms around Jewish unanimous support for Israel and the power of

establishment organizations to solely dictate American Jewish policy and public opinions regarding Israel.

### *Mapping Organizations*

This section will define and analyze the difference and similarities between different camps of American Jewish Israel-related organizations.<sup>3</sup> There are a range of organizations that engage in many forms of Israel-related activities. The AJYB breaks down Israel-related organizations into five categories: (1) Education, (2) Humanitarian, (3) Political and Advocacy, (4) Supporting Specific Israeli Institutions, (5) and Other (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 580). My analysis will look primarily at the 60 organizations within the “Political and Advocacy” section as this directly relates to my research question surrounding how recent changes in American politics have impacted American Jews political stances and affected the representation of viewpoints within American Jewish interest groups.

As I have developed in the following Table 2.1, American Jewish Political and Advocacy Israel-Related organizations can be roughly broken up into three different groups; each group upholds its own set of political beliefs, values, strategies, and missions. The three groups span a political spectrum of right- to left-leaning

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<sup>3</sup> While some organizations do not necessarily describe themselves within their mission’s as ‘Jewish,’ I consider them as Jewish for several reasons. Sociologists include these organizations when categorizing the overall number of American Jewish organizations. The editors of the American Jewish Year Book ascribe AIPAC, J Street, INN within the Israel-related category of national American Jewish organizations. Moreover, both AIPAC and J Street are connected to CoP: AIPAC is a member; and J Street applied for membership yet was denied. As well, the vast majority of leadership, membership, donors, and their partners of these organizations describe themselves as Jewish. I will explore the explicitly Jewish nature, practices, and/or connections in the case study chapters.

organizations. The specific traits of each group are also not necessarily exclusive, particularly since the Liberal Zionist group’s beliefs, issues, and strategies exist somewhere along a spectrum between the “Establishment” and “Anti-Occupation” camps.

**Table 2.1: Mapping American Jewish Israel-Related Organizational Life: Three Camps on Advocacy and Politics**

	Political- leaning	Example	Zionism?	Values: Universal or Particular? <sup>4</sup>	Who is at fault for beginning and/or perpetuating the Israeli- Palestinian Conflict?	Public Jewish Criticism of Israel?
ESTABLISHMENT	Center- and far-right	AIPAC	Good	Particular	Palestine	No
LIBERAL ZIONISM	Center- left	J Street	Good, as long as its liberal	Both	Israel and Palestine	Yes
ANTI- OCCUPATION	Far-left and progressive	IfNotNow	Bad or neutral	Universal	Israel	Yes

Table 2.1 is also broadly based upon Dov Waxman’s “The Four Camps in the American Jewish Debate about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” in *Trouble in the Tribe*

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<sup>4</sup> The category that distinguishes between universal and particular values is based upon Michael Barnett’s explanation of trends in his book *The Star and the Stripes*. These differences are described in the interest group section of chapter. Particularism or “tribalism” understands the Jewish people as distinctly and uniquely situated in the world. Universalism rather promotes to an obligation to care for all people around the world, and not only other Jews.

(Waxman 2016, 94). I have made changes to Waxman's table by adding additional distinguishing questions and renaming and consolidating organizational categories. Whereas Waxman includes a fourth "Far-Right" category separate from the "Right" camp, I have stylistically chosen not to distinguish between the two, as most of my analysis and research focuses on the growing differences and conflict between the right wing, center-left, and progressive organizations, and not between the Jewish center- and far-right groups. Throughout the next three sections I elucidate the differences between each group by presenting a case study organization that represents each camp.

### **AIPAC and the Establishment**

The first group I will explore is the "Establishment" which is defined by its particularistic interpretation of Judaism and is drawn to a version of Zionism that recognizes the Jewish people's unique connection to the land of Israel. Although internally members of establishment organizations are engaged in debate regarding Israeli politics, they also uphold clear 'red lines' leading them to reject organizations that publicly criticize Israel's policies, such as actions that are antithetical peace, occupation, or treatment of the Palestinian people. With regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they do not believe Israel is at fault, but rather point to the violent actions of the Palestinians as responsible for undermining peace.<sup>5</sup> AIPAC will serve as my case study for the American Jewish Establishment.

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<sup>5</sup> Far-right wing organizations share similar beliefs to the center-right wing camp that the "predicament of Palestinians...is solely the fault of Palestinian and Arab leaders, for which Israel bears no responsibility" (Waxman 2016, 97). Nonetheless, the further right wing camp goes further than this to reject the Palestinian claim that they are the indigenous inhabitants of the land (Waxman 2016, 97).

AIPAC has played an important role in shaping modern U.S. policy on Israel. The organization was incorporated in 1963, fifteen years after the founding of the State of Israel (Bruck 2014, paragraph 20). AIPAC advocates for “security assistance to Israel and the development of cooperative missile defense programs with the United States, which allow Israel to defend herself by herself” (AIPAC 2020). When promoting the U.S.-Israel relationship, AIPAC conceives and presents this security relationship as a benefit to both parties: Israel and the United States of America (AIPAC 2020). The organization is a registered domestic lobby group that is supported by private contributions. Among the actions in AIPAC’s broader strategy are “initiating email campaigns, offering trips to Israel for politicians and community leaders, developing constituency groups that will contact their Senators and Congressmen, and providing educational programs” (Yoffee 2014, paragraph 3).

AIPAC’s activists point to the work they put into building relationships as responsible for their success (Stolberg 2019, paragraph 19). According to the Center for Responsive Politics, in 2018 AIPAC spent 3.5 million dollars on lobbying. Among older American Jews, donating to AIPAC is primarily a practice. As Beinart described, “the average large donor to a major American Jewish organization is in his fifties, sixties, or seventies” (Beinart 2012, 31). Although AIPAC does not donate to political campaigns, many of the organization’s financial supporters are also actively engaged in supporting candidates that support with their pro-Israel ideals (Stolberg 2019).

AIPAC exists within two broader and overlapping structures: the ‘Israel Lobby’ and the American Jewish establishment (represented in the table). While these groups may overlap, there are distinct and important differences between the two that must be

recognized. The bounds and particular beliefs of the ‘Israel Lobby’ are debated and does include some diversity; this group broadly includes interest groups that support the political, military, and cultural relationship between the United and Israel. Some of the most powerful and prominent organizations within the Israel Lobby are AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League, the Conference of Presidents [of Major American Jewish Organizations], the Zionist Organization of America, and Christians United for Israel” (Mearsheimer 2017, paragraph 26). One important distinction between the ‘Israel Lobby’ and the American Jewish establishment is that the Israel Lobby also includes organizations that are not Jewish, like Christians United for Israel. AIPAC is also a widely discussed example of the Israel since is it is the “most powerful” and “best known” group about the “Israel Lobby” (Mearsheimer 2017, paragraph 26).

One of the most important pieces of literature on the “Israel Lobby” and specifically AIPAC is John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt’s 2016 book *The Israel Lobby*. Mearsheimer and Walt argue that “the United States has a special relationship with Israel that has no parallel in modern history and it is almost wholly due to the lobby” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007) (Mearsheimer 2017, under “John Mearsheimer”). The uniqueness of this relationship stems from unconditional support of the United States delivered through aid (Mearsheimer 2017, under “John Mearsheimer”). AIPAC and other organizations are criticized by opponents who argue that the Lobby controls U.S. foreign policy. Mearsheimer and Walt debate these misconceptions by illustrating that the Lobby functions “pretty much the same” as other powerful interest groups, like the National Rifle Association, the farm lobby, and many others.



Organizations within the Jewish establishment hold inherent differences from the Israel Lobby. Although they may espouse similar pro-Israel viewpoints to the Israel Lobby, many organizations' fundamental purposes are not to promote the U.S.-Israel relationship, but rather to create a space for Jewish religious and cultural experiences. Organizations like AIPAC and the CoP exist at the intersection of both spaces, both within the broader structure of the American Jewish establishment and the American Israel Lobby. Moreover, although AIPAC is not Jewish, and therefore should not be understood as representing the views of the greater American Jewish population, Jews make up AIPAC's "vital core" (Bruck 2014, paragraph 10).

AIPAC today commands a large amount of power in Washington and is also highly organized across the United States. With 100,000 members, 17 regional offices, and "a vast pool of donors," AIPAC is a powerful actor that shapes American foreign policy on Israel (Bruck 2014, paragraph 10). The power of AIPAC (and other organizations within the Israel Lobby) has been widely discussed and is considered highly controversial. Nonetheless, AIPAC itself recognizes the power that it holds in Washington to shape U.S. policy on Israel. Connie Bruck, in her 2014 New Yorker article, asserts that AIPAC's promotional literature describes how a reception during its annual policy conference "will be attended by more members of Congress than almost any other event, except for a joint session of Congress or a State of the Union address" (Bruck 2014, paragraph 2). However, AIPAC has not always been this powerful.

Before the Six-day War AIPAC was still a rather small and unknown organization in Washington, DC. The Six-Day War and Israel's subsequent victory was one of the most important moments in AIPAC's history, for it emboldened the relationship between

American Jews and Israel as well as solidified the key political and cultural role that AIPAC played within this relationship. American Jewish support for Israel, through lobbying the U.S. Congress to provide Israel with military support, fostered a sense among American Jews that they were a part of Israel's military victories. As Michael Barnett describes, American Jews garnered support in their unique ways, "Israel had F-15s, America had the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and it was because of AIPAC that Israel had the F-15s. Israel and American Jews made a great team. At times, American Jews seemed to mistake Israel's military feats for their own" (Barnett 2016, 163). As Israel grew central to the American Jewish identity, the cultural significance of AIPAC among American Jews also grew simultaneously. No longer just a Washington, DC lobby group, AIPAC became the "bellwether" of one's Jewish identity (Barnett 2016, 164). For example, AIPAC's annual Washington, DC Policy Conference became "something akin to High Holiday services for the Jewish political elite" (Barnett 2016, 164).

AIPAC's narrative of ubiquitous support for Israel emphasizes a tribalistic understanding of the Jewish identity. As introduced in chapter 1, there are two different and opposing notions of Jewish identity—particularism/tribalism and universalism/cosmopolitanism, as described by Michael Barnett in *The Star and the Stripes*. The term particularism describes and defines "how Jews see themselves in relation to Gentiles, their obligations to those inside and outside the Jewish community, and their sense of the purpose of the world" (Barnett 2016, 7). Particularism emphasizes the notion of Jewish purpose and place in the world as *Am Segulah*, or "chosen people" (Barnett 2016, 7) Particularism is central to the AIPAC and American Jewish

establishment's construction of Jewish identity, for they see the Jewish people as distinctly and uniquely situated in the world, both in terms of their historical experiences and connection to Israel.

AIPAC connects the existence of Israel (and its personal role in promoting and preserving Israel's security) to a broader narrative of Jewish peoplehood and their experiences as the eternal victim. AIPAC's role in creating, maintaining, and promoting the United States' political and military support for Israel has in turn led the organization to elevate the perception of their importance to the survival of the Jewish people. As Connie Bruck describes this phenomenon:

AIPAC created an interesting mantra that they honestly believed: that, if AIPAC had existed prior to the Second World War, America would have stopped Hitler. It's a great motivator, and a great fund-raiser—but I think it's also AIPAC's greatest weakness. Because if you convince yourself that, if only you had been around, six million Jews would not have been killed, then you sort of lose sight of the fact that the U.S. has its own foreign policy, and, while it is extremely friendly to Israel, it will only go so far (Bruck 2014).

This narrative of victimhood is presented by the broader camp of the American Jewish establishment. This camp draws a connection between the biblical traumas, such as escaping oppression in Ancient Egypt, to those more recent, such as the Holocaust. For American Jews in this group, they connect the very founding and survival of Israel with freedom from ever again having to experience existential threats to their existence. Before the founding of the modern state of Israel, modern Jewish identity was predicated on the idea of exile within the diaspora. The re-establishment of a modern state of Israel in Jews biblical home therefore transformed the Jewish narrative from one of exile into one of redemption. The historical understanding of Jewish identity grounded in victimhood shapes how the pro-Israel camp sees physical and political attacks on Israel

today. Whether it is violent uprisings against the Israeli military or a peaceful protest from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, the pro-Israel camp connects these incidents to the long history of anti-Semitism and Jewish victimhood. Pro-Israel groups will thus delegitimize beliefs that run counter to a particularistic narrative of Judaism, connecting the historical and biblical connections to Israel and the unique experiences of victimhood with the importance of Israel today.

### **J Street and Liberal Zionism**

The “Liberal Zionist” group spans the two visions of modern Judaism--Universalism and Particularism—pushing the group to embrace not only the ancient Jewish unique connection to the land of Israel, but also the cosmopolitan values of social justice and care for all human beings. As a result of these competing values, organizations within the “Liberal Zionist camp” uphold a vision of Israel that is driven by both liberal, democratic values and a recognition of the place as the eternal Jewish national homeland. These two visions lead the center-left camp to publicly question both the Israeli and Palestinian’s governments actions that defy peace and a future two-state solution, while simultaneously affirming and supporting the Israel’s right to exist as Jewish state.

While the Liberal Zionism group may often have overlapping interests, values, or beliefs to the two other groups, there are clear red lines that Establishment and Anti-Occupation organizations uphold that separate Liberal Zionist organizations from these two other camps. While in the past Liberal Zionist organizations were regarded as beyond the pale of acceptance and normalcy for establishment organizations, these red lines have

begun to evolve, allowing these center-left organizations to slowly grow to become more normalized and accepted by some mainstream American Jews.

The case study organization that represents the “Liberal Zionist” is J Street, an organization that was founded in 2007 to “serve as the political home and voice for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans” (J Street 2020). The founder and president of J Street Jeremy Ben Ami describes how he created J Street to provide a “moderate voice”—a voice that he believes has been “drowned out” by “the loudest eight percent” of American Jews who are the most vocal, single-minded, right-wing, and uncritical in their support for Israel (Jeremy Ben-Ami, *A New Voice for Israel*, 94–95). He believed that the viewpoint his organization presents—of supporting Israel while allowing for criticism of it—would better represent the majority of Jewish Americans. This viewpoint greatly differs from the policies of establishment organizations like AIPAC who yield unwavering support for Israel irrespective of the extent to which the nation takes actions following democratic values, particularly in its treatment of the Palestinian people. Ben-Ami saw the vast amount of power that AIPAC wielded in Washington, DC among political actors, and therefore he envisioned creating an organization that would “give cover to Democrats to get tough on Israel and pressure them to make a deal with Palestinians” (Saleh and Grim 2019, paragraph 5).

J Street is part of a group of other left-leaning organizations engaged in promoting a two-state solution. On June 24, 2019, ten leading organizations—Ameinu, Americans for Peace Now, Hashomer Hatzair, The Jewish Labor Committee, J Street, The New Israel Fund, Partners for Progressive Israel, Reconstructing Judaism, and T’ruah—united to create the Progressive Israel Network Organizations. As Reconstructing Judaism

describes, the network will “provide a strong, unified voice in support of its members’ common goals: democracy and equal rights, religious freedom and pluralism, and a two-state solution that would secure a peaceful future for Israel and end the 52-year-long occupation” (Reconstructing Judaism 2019, paragraph 4). These organizations seek better representation and recognition among mainstream American Jewish institutions. The Progressive Israel Network will, for example, run for a joint list in the World Zionist Congress to ensure that institutions will “reflect our values” (Reconstructing Judaism 2019, paragraph 3).

While J Street was not the first organization to seek to change the status quo to embrace both liberal and pro-Israel values, seeking to shape the narrative around Israel within American politics and across American Jewish political life, the organization has been by far one of the most successful among other like-minded organizations. J Street’s founder describes how he views it as a victory that there is now a growing awareness of the diversity of opinions among American Jews:

Five years ago [before J Street was founded] there was no sense in this town that there were two points of view in the Jewish community. Today I would say that eighty percent of people in this town are aware that there is a division in the Jewish community on this issue [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict]. Just awareness of the existence of diversity of debate is a huge victory (quoted in Waxman 2016, 179).

J Street’s actions that seek to change the narrative around Israel is not about telling people exactly what to believe, but rather is about “trying to redefine what it means to be pro-Israel. You don’t have to be noncritical. You don’t have to adopt the party line. It’s not, ‘Israel, right or wrong’” (Traub 2009, paragraph 2).

The organization has grown successfully since its founding in 2007. During J Street's first few years, it went from "being a small start-up (with only four full-time staff members) to becoming a major player in the pro-Israel lobby (with a staff of fifty). J Street's operating budget increased from roughly \$1.5 million in 2008 to almost \$7 million in 2013" (quoted in Waxman 2016, 164). As of 2019, J Street has a \$10 million annual budget (Saleh and Grim 2019, section "equal opportunity boss"). The organization today also commands a large membership of "well over 100,000 supporters" (Waxman 2016, 164). J Street has also showed increasing growth at its annual national conferences; "1,500 people attended its first conference in October 2009, which featured a keynote speech by then U.S. national security adviser James L. Jones. By the time of its fourth conference, in 2013, there were more than 2,800 attendees, and speeches by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, U.S. Middle East envoy Martin Indyk, and Israel's then minister of justice and lead peace negotiator Tzipi Livni" (Waxman 2016, 165).

The growth of J Street, in drawing attention to the diversity of beliefs on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict among American Jews, has also illustrated that groups like AIPAC do not speak for all Jewish Americans. The name of the group fits in with this vision of fulfilling a role that didn't previously exist. As the 2019 article in "The Intercept" describes, the group chose to name itself "J Street" as because "there is no J Street in the city, and this new group aimed to be something new under the Washington sun" (Saleh and Grim 2019, paragraph 7). The founder of the organization has played such a central role since the beginning that the "joke inside J Street is that the "J" now stands for "Jeremy" (Saleh and Grim 2019, paragraph 7).

While J-street's target audience are "pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who want Israel to be secure, democratic and the national home of the Jewish people," they work actively with and for American Jewish communities whose voices were previously "underrepresented and ignored in our politics" (J Street 2019, under "What we do"). In J Street's paperwork when they filed for non-profit status, the organization best described mobilization and action strategy: "by educating, organizing and mobilizing the large segment (81 percent) of American Jews who support strong U.S. leadership for a two-state solution, we can provide the space and support the president and policy makers need to boldly help Israelis and Palestinians resolve their conflict" (GuideStar 2006, under "Charting Impact").

J Street has embraced an organizing strategy that advocates and engages individuals on every level—"in Washington, in political campaigns, in our communities and on campuses" (J Street 2020, under "What we do"). Through J Street U, the student organizing arm of J Street, the organization engages students, trains campus leadership, and fosters a community of young people interested in changing campus dialogue around the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (J Street U 2020). Meanwhile, JStreetPAC was established in 2008 as the "first-ever federal political action committee (PAC) to explicitly promote American leadership to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (J Street Pac 2020). The PAC has the goal of demonstrating that there is a "depth and breadth of political support" for candidates that favor a "diplomacy-first approach to advancing US interests in the Middle East and promoting peace and security for Israel" (J Street Pac 2020). J Street's campus organizing arm and affiliated PAC allow it to attack its mission of changing the national conversation and create the political space for pro-Israel and



pro-Peace policies. Whereas the former provides it the tools to promote activism and organizing among young people on this issue, the latter seeks to ensure that the people who will support their goals are granted a position of power.

The growth of J Street has called into question the power of AIPAC. J street has only a “tiny fraction of AIPAC’s financial power and influence on Capitol Hill,” yet as Connie Bruck describes J Street has tried to “provide at least some campaign funding to weaken the lobby’s grip” (Bruck 2014, paragraph 55). Despite J Street being founded to provide an alternative to AIPAC and its success in challenging the prior status quo, the organization denies that it has any intention to compete with AIPAC. In one interview for example, Ben-Ami describes that “we [ J Street] are not, in any way, in opposition to AIPAC. In fact, we want to work with them on much of what they do” (quoted in Waxman 2016, 267). However, Waxman denotes a contradictory statement by Ben-Ami during an author interview in 2011 saying that “just getting members of Congress to say no when AIPAC calls is the first step” (quoted in Waxman 2016, 267). Waxman also describes the implications of “J Street’s rapid expansion and growing political activism” as “not only challenged AIPAC, but also undoubtedly contributed—for better or for worse (depending on your point of view)—to the further splintering of the pro-Israel lobby” (Waxman 2016, 148). By “splintering of the pro-Israel lobby,” Waxman is referring to the increasing fragmentation and political division within the Israel Lobby as a result of being challenged by contradictory viewpoints, particularly from increasingly powerful American Jewish institutions, like J Street.

The American Jewish establishment has resisted changes to accepted viewpoints around Israel stemming from Liberal Zionist organizations like J Street. One clear

occasion of when the establishment upheld very clear red lines was when the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CoP) denied J Street membership to the Conference in 2014. This significant and recent example of denying J Street from joining a prominent body of powerful American Jewish by a wide margin illustrates the American Jewish establishment's continuous resistance to groups that criticize Israel. J Street responded to its denied entry by arguing that it reaffirms their reasoning for existing: that the Jewish establishment claims to "speak for the entire Jewish community," yet they do not "in fact represent the full diversity of pro-Israel views in [the Jewish and broader American] community" (Black 2014, paragraph 4).

### **IfNotNow and Anti-Occupation Activism**

The "Anti-Occupation" group is defined by a universalist vision of Judaism that compels American Jews to stand up against actions that support the Israeli occupation. This means that these organization disagree with and criticize not only Israel's actions that deliberately undermine the freedom and dignity of Palestinians but also the actions of the American Jewish community, and particularly the Jewish establishment, that support Israel. The "Anti-Occupation" camp focuses specifically on Israel's role in perpetuating the conflict by occupying the Palestinian territories. They support actions that lead to the "shared humanity and full equality of Palestinians and Israelis alike" (Dashefsky and Sheskin 2019, 639). The American Jewish Establishment views these "Anti-Occupation" groups as 'beyond the pale' of acceptance and describe such groups as "self-hating Jews." Although the "Anti-Occupation" and "Liberal Zionist" groups at times uphold similar opinions, there are clear red lines between these groups; for example, whereas the

former upholds either negative or neutral beliefs about Zionism, the latter outwardly expresses and celebrates Zionism. IfNotNow (INN) is an important example of an anti-occupation Jewish group that has gained traction and significant attention since its founding.

INN was founded during the midst of the 2014 Israel-Gaza war also known as Operation Protective Edge. Mainstream American Jewish institutions, like AIPAC, responded to this violence by mourning the lives of Israelis lost or put in danger and supporting the Israeli government's aggressive tactics to quell Palestinian violence in Gaza and the West Bank. Instead, this group of American Jews came together to "honor the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian life" (IfNotNow 2020, under "How IfNotNow Began & Our Strategy"). Across nearly a dozen cities American Jews joined together in protest. They said the Mourner's Kaddish, the Jewish prayer in honor of the deceased, for both Palestinians and Israeli lives lost. The protestors presented three demands, "Stop the War on Gaza, End the Occupation, and Freedom and Dignity for All;" these demands would later inform INN's mission (IfNotNow 2020, under "How IfNotNow Began & Our Strategy"). The protestors' recognition of the Palestinian narrative and suffering stands in stark contrast to Jewish establishment organizations who blame the Palestinians and interpret these acts of violence within the constructs of terrorism.

Since the start of INN's movement, the organization has constructed its practices and values around Jewish ritual, traditions, languages, and practices (IfNotNow 2020, under "Our Principles"). INN's protests have continuously incorporated Jewish elements and have made Jewish songs and teachings central to their protest of American Jewish support of the Occupation. The group's name is also founded in Jewish tradition. They

united around the name, “If Not Now, When?” in 2014 (that would later become IfNotNow). This phrase originates from a well-known saying by the 1st century Jewish teacher Hillel the Elder: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And being for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” (Blumberg 2014, paragraph 3).

INN’s mission spans both American politics in general as well as American Jewish institutions with the goal of reorienting policies regarding Israel around liberal values, including justice. As INN’s website describes, “on the one hand, we are part of the ubiquitous American project, taking action so all can be equal. And on the other, we embrace our uniquely Jewish identity, as we sit down to shabbat dinner or sit in at ICE detention centers” (IfNotNow 2020, under “United and clear-eyed, we are the majority and the future of our community”). Today, the organization is working toward two interrelated goals: to end Israel’s occupation and to transform the American Jewish community to represent their values of justice and dignity (IfNotNow 2020, under “Who We Are”).

After the 2014 war in Gaza ended, the leaders of these protests sought to cultivate a widespread American Jewish movement centered around ending the occupation of Palestinians and standing for the freedom and dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis. They joined the Momentum organizing community, a training institute and movement incubator that has had participants across many other significant and recent movement-building groups, including Black Lives Matter, Dream Defenders, BYP100, United We Dream, Showing Up For Racial Justice, 350.org, National People’s Action, PICO, and more” (Momentum Community 2020, under “What does Momentum teach?”). The organization thus upholds a grassroots structure of organizing and grew alongside a

cohort of other significant liberal movements, many of which gained momentum in response to the rise of Donald Trump. INN believes in Momentum’s organizational strategy that change will happen when there is either 3.5 % active support or 50% passive support for their cause; INN approximates this to support from 180,000 American Jews actively or 3 million Jewish passively (IfNotNow 2018).

After joining Momentum organizing community, IfNotNow has grown exponentially from a small group of American Jews concerned with the “hawkish response of American Jewish institutions” towards the violence of Operation Protective Edge into a vibrant grassroots social movement working across sixteen cities in the United States and Canada (IfNotNow 2020, under “How IfNotNow Began & Our Strategy”). Between 2016 and 2018, IfNotNow hosted more than 350 protests, cumulatively engaging 10,000 people (Brinley 2018, paragraph 23). As of 2019, INN had “trained an estimated 1,675 people, drawn countless more sympathizers and casual supporters, and become a formidable opponent to the right and center-left” (Reisman 2019, paragraph 10).

INN’s organizing beliefs are based around a social view of power in which people exist at the top and “have the power” and the power holders exist at the bottom (IfNotNow 2018). Instead of leaders dictating to individuals the organization’s beliefs, the people hold their leaders accountable. Through this strategy, INN has focused their efforts on gaining support from the public—the mainstream American Jewish community—rather than meeting with existing community leadership (or the boards of American Jewish Establishment organizations). As INN describes in their training

materials for new activists, “sustainable change will only happen if we create a cultural change in our community” and then leadership will follow (IfNotNow 2018).

The organization’s national organizing structure of “Support and Coordination” aligns with their vision of employing grassroots activism to dismantle existing systems of power. This system of organizing has likely been an important factor in leading to the INN’s success in mobilizing young American Jews and quickly growing their organization. INN’s national organizing structure features regional “Hives” that bring together activists within local groups. Each Hive has a set of teams, with several teams focused on particular tasks; for example, each local Hive has an ‘actions team’ and a ‘communications team.’ Within each team, there are two coaches or “spokes” that “support and participate in local teams, share lessons and coordinate across cities, decide on national proposals with advice from their local teams, and run regular local team organization trainings” (INN Training Materials, “National Structure - Support and Coordination,” 2019). Then, each of these specific regional teams unite form a “Hub” that brings together other teams fulfilling the same role from other cities, such as Actions/Communication Hub (INN Training Materials). This organizational structure inherently creates routes for regional and national cooperation and open lines of communication, as well as encourages growth of local-level leaders through coaches and spokes. The grassroots structure has helped the organization gain Jewish members and leaders from diverse backgrounds, as well as aided and accelerated its growth across several cities.

INN has made strides in moving forward with their four-phase plan to transform the American Jewish community. According to their four-phase plan the group must first

be united, build a foundation, and then show itself as a growing social movement. Next, the young generation must take action and show that they stand for freedom and dignity for both Palestinians and Israelis. Third, they must expose the moral crisis through showing that people across generations concerned and taking action in unprecedented numbers. Finally, they seek to shift the majority of US Jewish community (INN Training Materials). INN is currently in the second phase of mobilization—appealing to young American Jews who are outraged by the situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their own community’s response to this violence. INN’s materials describe their two target constituencies as millennial liberals and young Jewish leaders involved in Jewish institutions—or, in simpler terms “engaged Jews looking for a political home & activists looking for a Jewish home” (INN Training Materials). As a result, their current actions to mobilize young Jewish Americans and to depict themselves as an important force to be reckoned with should be understood as part of a broader, consecutive, and ongoing strategy to transform American Jewish institutions’ policies regarding Israel.

INN exists as part of a group of progressive American Jewish organizations related to Israel and the conflict that seeks to end the Occupation, promote the dignity and rights of both Israeli and Palestinians, and conduct social justice work. Among organizations within this group are Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), New Israel Fund, T’ruah. Founded in 1996, JVP has been engaged in this issues much longer than INN and embraces similar goals through their focus on seeking “an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; security and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians; a just solution for Palestinian refugees based on principles established in international law; an end to violence against civilians; and peace and

justice for all peoples of the Middle East” (Jewish Voice for Peace 2020, under “Mission”). However, these two groups differ in their approach to presenting positions on controversial issues. INN does not take a stand on the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions “(BDS) movement, political Zionism, or a 1- or 2- state solution to the conflict” (Wyron 2017, 5). Meanwhile, JVP supports the BDS movements and “unequivocally oppose[s] Zionism” (Jewish Voice for Peace 2020, under “Our Approach to Zionism”). INN’s choice not to take a stand on these issues make it unique from other American Jewish leftist organizations working on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. As described in a 2019 New York Magazine profile, INN’s refusal to answer certain questions regarding issues is a helpful strategy by “uniting people” with a broader set of beliefs, joining together those who are Zionist and anti-Zionist, as well as supporters and opponents of BDS (Reisman 2019, paragraph 12). Nonetheless, the lack of clear viewpoints on controversial issues has incited criticism from opponents who say that “it hasn’t articulated and agreed upon what it’s *for* so much as what it’s *against*” (Reisman 2019, paragraph 34).

Besides “Anti-Occupation” organizations, INN also exists within a broader network of American Jewish organizations working to secure and promote progressive causes in the United States, such as Bend the Arc and Jews for Racial & Economic Justice. This group of organizations are not specifically focused on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, but rather are oriented around social justice. They draw upon Jewish values like *tikkun olam* to motivate their activism for liberal causes.

INN’s relationship to liberal “Liberal Zionist” or “Establishment” organizations is shaped by the fact that many of its activists were previously affiliated members or leaders



within these other organizations. For example, IfNotNow co-founder Simone Zimmerman was previously the national president of J Street U, the campus arm of J Street. She ultimately felt that J Street was not “radical enough” for her beliefs, especially after J Street expressed unanimous support for Israel during the 2014 war (Reisman 2019, Section 2). J Street does not necessarily see the growth of organizations to its left as negative, and Ben-Ami even told the writers of a New York Magazine article “The Jewish Revolt” that he finds IfNotNow “really exciting” (Reisman 2019, paragraph 11).

Zimmerman’s story is not unique, and many of IfNotNow’s members were previously affiliated in the American Jewish Establishment or other Liberal organizations. As the New York Post profile of INN describes, “Zimmerman’s story is echoed in those of so many IfNotNow members. Time and again, I spoke to Jewish 20- and (to a lesser extent) 30-somethings who were raised in the Reform or Conservative denominations and remain as passionate about the Jewish community and Jewish practice as they are newly critical of its institutions” (Reisman 2019, Section 2). These prior personal relationships among members, particularly with “Establishment” organizations, have shaped INN’s mission to “transform the American Jewish community” to reflect their Jewish values (IfNotNow 2019, under “Who We Are”). INN’s #YouNeverToldMe campaign depicts this complicated relationship with Jewish Establishment organizations, calling upon “Jewish summer camp, day school, and youth group alumni who grew up in institutions that ignored or justified the Occupation” to share their experiences and ask their “institutions to provide Jewish education that advances freedom and dignity for all people” (You Never Told Me 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provides a framework to understand the three primary groups of American Jewish organizations engaged in Israel- and Conflict-related work. These three groups—the “Establishment,” “Liberal Zionist,” and “Occupation” groups—exist on a spectrum, and the “Liberal Zionist” category shares some similarities with both groups. However, some fundamental differences separate these camps of organizations, often leading to conflict

The founding, growth, and increasing normalization of organizations in the “Liberal Zionist” and “Anti-Occupation” camps questions the power of the establishment to shape the narrative over Jewish support for Israel both internally and outside of the Jewish community. The traditionalist and transformationalist differences apply to the American Jewish divide over Israel, impacting how one perceives changes to Jewish attachments to Israel. Traditionalists look negatively upon changes to the status quo around Jewish attachment to Israel, such as the growth of “Liberal Zionist” and “Anti-Occupation” groups, and seek to preserve consensus support for Israel; Transformationalists would instead view these changes in a more hopeful light as an opportunity to develop new forms of Jewishness and Jewish practice in the modern world.

The next chapter discusses how changes in American politics since 2016 have impacted the three camps of American Jewish Israel-related organizations in a variety of ways. I depict the role of changes that American politics played in effecting American Jewish life through exploring its unique impact on each of my three case study organizations.

## **Post-2016 American Jewish Politics**

### **Introduction**

My thesis seeks to understand to what extent fundamental changes in American politics have affected American Jewish interest groups and public opinions. To measure these effects, I have chosen to look particularly at American Jewish organizations that are Israel-related. The changes within these interest groups are at the epicenter of broader changes to American Jewish political life and help to illuminate the growing changes in political sentiment and mobilization among American Jews today. These changes should not be understood as the sole result of changes in American politics. Rather, American political rifts and movements since 2016 have furthered previously existing internal trends in American Jewish life, such as growing rates of intermarriage, different generational experiences, and the diverging politics of Israel and American Jews as discussed in chapter 2. The development of these trends has led to an increase in internal polarization and political mobilization.

This chapter will explore how phenomena resulting from the 2016 election—the rise of Trump, challenges to bipartisanship, and growing rifts within the Democratic Party between leftist and progressive factions—have directly impacted American Jewish interest group representation and mobilization on the issue of Israel, particularly as it relates to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After describing these phenomena and their relation to politics in Israel and the U.S.-Israeli relationship, I analyze their connection to

recent internal changes within my three case study organizations. Through examining AIPAC, IfNotNow, and J Street's internal challenges or mobilization since 2016, I illustrate how changes within American Jewish Israel-politics were advanced through fundamental changes in American politics.

### **The Rise of Trump, Political Polarization, and Democratic Party Rifts**

The 2016 election sparked substantial changes within American politics and political culture. Although political polarization and the growth of progressive movements in America had already begun during the prior years of President Obama, this election was monumental and furthered existing political divisions across America. The following sections explore how the rise of Donald Trump during the 2016 election, with his untraditional rhetoric, values, and presidency, advanced the already existing polarization between Republicans and Democrats. Trump's discussion and implementation of policies that undermined minority rights stimulated progressive groups to take immediate action and rally for the rights of women, undocumented immigrants, women, and LGBTQ people among others; progressive mobilization into counter protests contributed to the growth of the progressive wing of the Democratic party in the years following Trump's election. These trends in American political culture directly impacted individuals and political actors across America. American Jewish politics is just one example of many groups that was affected.

Before the 2016 election, pertinent political divides existed in Jewish America—divides that ebbed and flowed depending upon the political circumstances of the time in the United States and Israel. Nonetheless, the rise of President Donald Trump in 2016

catalyzed fundamental changes in American politics that protruded American Jewish life. For Democrats, the 2016 election cultivated significant political mobilization on social justice issues. American Jews similarly became swept up in these social justice movements. They joined causes relevant to their Jewishness—including promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace and fighting the recent upsurge in anti-Semitism and white nationalism—along with many secular causes, such as protecting undocumented immigrants and protesting for women’s rights. As a result, the larger transformations within American political life shaped and informed the causes and the representation of viewpoints across American Jewish interest groups, leading to mobilization and polarization.

#### *Political Polarization*

Political polarization, or the vast and growing gap between Republicans and Democrats, has become a “defining feature of American politics today” (Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization”). As liberals’ and conservatives’ viewpoints move further apart on the political spectrum, Americans’ willingness to listen to disagreeing viewpoints have diminished. Americans that hold views from opposing ends of the political spectrum also exist in separate political ‘bubbles,’ reading dissimilar new sources, socializing with groups of like-minded individuals, and following accounts on social media that espouse similar views. This has led to the erosion of interactions between individuals with viewpoints from different ends of the political spectrum, impacting how American political organizations operate and decreasing everyday Americans’ willingness to cooperate, as well as political actors’ bipartisanship, such as in Congress.

While Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 election was in many ways a product of the already existing polarization in the United States, his presidency has continuously played into, and increased, partisan divides. One illustration of the growing polarization was Trump's approval ratings from his third year in office; "eighty-two percentage points separated Republicans' (89%) and Democrats' (7%) average job approval ratings" (Jones 2020, paragraph 1). As Jeffrey Jones describes in Gallup, this is the "largest degree of political polarization in any presidential year measured by Gallup, surpassing the 79-point party gap in Trump's second year in office" (Jones 2020, paragraph 1).

The issue of Israel has also not remained separate from the growing partisanship in the United States. As Martin Indyk, a former ambassador to Israel under President Bill Clinton, described "this split between Republicans and Democrats on Israel is real and is mirrored in a split between the government of Israel and the American Jewish community" (Stolberg 2019). According to a 2018 poll by Pew Research Center, the partisan divide over American support for Israel was at its "widest in four decades, with 79 percent of Republicans sympathizing with Israel in its dispute with the Palestinians, versus 27 percent of Democrats" (quoted in Stolberg 2019) (Pew Research Center 2018). Although 70% of American Jews identify as Democrats, American Jewish Republicans are much more likely to see caring about Israel as an essential part of being Jewish (Pew Research Center 2013). The rise of Trump has furthered these existing challenges to bipartisanship, putting American Jewish organizations and individuals who support Israel in a difficult place. Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, who leads Ohev Sholom, an Orthodox congregation in Washington, D.C., describes how Trump's alignment with Israel is in some ways "very dangerous" (Lerer and Diaz 2019, paragraph 7). Rabbi Herzfeld said

that “if Israel equals Trump, then there is a concern that opposition to Trump will transition, God forbid, into opposition to Israel” (Lerer and Diaz 2019, paragraph 7).

Israel’s internal politics is similarly divided between two polls with increasingly right-wing leadership, as represented by current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing Likud Party and Benny Gantz’ central and liberal political alliance Blue and White. Under the leadership of Netanyahu, Israel has moved further to the right and has undertaken blatantly discriminatory policies against Palestinians as well as the non-Jewish Arab citizens. The 2018 nation-state law in particular illustrates this right-ward movement by “legally enshrining Israel’s Jewish character” at the expense of minority groups living in the nation (Badie 2019).

As Israel moves further to the right, the “Netanyahu-Republican Alliance has only strengthened” (Stolberg 2019). The growing alliance between Trump and Netanyahu serves to benefit both leaders in their re-election campaigns. Martin S. Indyk described that “you have a situation where Netanyahu is relying on Trump to help him in his re-election, and Trump is expecting Netanyahu to reciprocate” (Stolberg 2019). The relationship between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu “could not be better,” for Trump has served as a reliable ally for Netanyahu’s most controversial policies, such as recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a disputed territory (Badie 2019). Netanyahu has reciprocated appreciation for Trump by, for example, naming a new town after Trump in June 2019 (Stolberg 2019).

The polarizing and controversial nature of Trump’s presidency throughout the United States, and Trump’s explicit alignment with right wing forces within Israel, has created unique challenges for American Jews. The sections following depict how

Trump's election and support for Israel has contributed to polarization and challenges to bipartisanship for American Jews on the issue of Israel.

### *Democratic Party Rifts*

A big split has also emerged within the Democratic party that is characterized by an ideological divide between progressive and moderate camps. The differences between these two factions grew especially apparent during the 2020 Democratic Party debates. Progressive candidates like Senator Bernie Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren stood in stark contrast to moderate Democratic candidates like Vice President Joe Biden and Mayor Pete Buttigieg. These groups represent separate ideological factions within the Democratic party. The trend of support for these different candidates and visions of the Democratic party is also generational skewed with younger democrats embracing a more progressive vision of party politics.

This progressive-left divide has had noticeable effects on American Jews today, the vast majority of whom lean Democrat. Alisson Summers describes in *Haaretz* how focusing only on the left-right polarization narrative “distracts from a second and more complicated divide: A growing political and generational split within the Democratic liberal American-Jewish majority” (Summers 2019). As identified in Chapter 2, generational divides have not only pervaded the Democratic party, but also American Jewish life. Older and younger generations of Jewish Americans have had fundamentally different Jewish and Israel experiences that have led younger generations to orient their values around social justice and progressive causes, while older generations instead remain more attached to particularistic values that lead them to unequivocally support Israel. Aaron David Miller, a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International



Peace and expert on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, connects the “deepening generational divide in the Democratic Party” to generational differences among American Jews (Stolberg 2019). For example, whereas young, progressive Jews protested outside of AIPAC’s policy conference, “older Democrats like Ms. Pelosi and Representative Steny H. Hoyer, the majority leader, address[ed] delegates inside” (Stolberg 2019).

Since the 2016 election, the discourse within the Democratic Party on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has changed. Phyllis Bennis’ article “The 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign: Changing Discourse on Palestine” argues that although “both major political parties and both likely candidates ended up situated within or just to the right of the standard U.S. pro-Israel policy positions,” discourse regarding Israel-Palestine was “on the Democratic table for the first time in decades, to be debated and discussed as a legitimate campaign issue” (Bennis 2016, 35). Bernie Sanders’ rise in the Democratic Primaries, and his willingness to openly critique Israeli policy, therefore challenging existing taboos that prevented speaking out against pro-Israel policies and the Israel Lobby, was certainly important (Bennis 2016, 35). However, one new aspect of this election was the existence of “some actual discussion and real disagreements among politicians” on important U.S.-Israel policy issues, such as the legality of settlements, the amount of U.S. military aid to Israel, and Israel’s use of force during the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza (Bennis 2016, 38). Bennis’ article shows that although the party leaders—Clinton and Trump—remained committed to traditional standpoints on Israel, this election represented a turning point in how the Democratic party approached the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict through eroding the existence or appearance of unanimity over support for Israel, especially among progressive politicians. Since the 2016 election,

this trend of increasing criticism of Israel among Democratic party leaders and politicians, and particularly those who subscribe to progressive ideals has continued, creating a splintering among progressive and leftist leaders.

## **Case Study Analysis**

### *The First Encounter*

When Trump first joined the stage at AIPAC's annual policy conference (PC) in Washington, DC in 2016, many were unsure of what sort of welcome the controversial candidate would receive. A highly important event for those tuned into Israel politics, the conference typically features keynote speeches by American political leaders from across the political spectrum, along with Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with the goal of educating and inspiring participants, garnering donations, and promoting the U.S.-Israel partnership. With over 18,000 attendees, this annual event serves as the largest gathering of America's pro-Israel community, among which are thousands of American Jewish adults. The annual conference has invited and hosted both Democratic and Republican presidential primary candidates across several election. That year, 2016, AIPAC invited all of the major parties' presidential candidates to speak to their delegation.

AIPAC's announcement that, then presidential candidate, Donald Trump would join to address AIPAC's Policy Conference spurred widespread conversation among event attendees regarding how his presence would and ought to be received. Some members struggled to reconcile Trump's claims that there is "no one more pro-Israel" than himself, with the other and more concerning parts of his record, including that he

initially failed to disavow the support of former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke (Golshan 2016, paragraph 8). Despite AIPAC's practice of allowing each dignified person, regardless of their political party or politics, to speak and to greet them earnestly, some of AIPAC's left-leaning attendees considered breaking this traditional procedure of decorum. In the days leading up to the conference, a group of Rabbis planned to walk out during Trump's remarks. Rabbi David Paskin, one of the organizers of the walkout, shared that the walkout was "about denouncing hatred in all forms;" it was a reaction to "Trump calling Mexican immigrants' rapists, most Muslims terrorists, and American Jews money-hungry negotiators" (Golshan 2016, paragraph 5).

During the conference, many questioned whether a larger group of people would join the walk-out during Trump's speech; in other words, would there be a noticeable shift in attitude and enthusiasm among attendees when Trump walked on stage? While there were certainly individuals who were excited about Trump's invitation to speak at AIPAC and happily welcomed him to the conference stage, there were also certainly others who either silently or loudly bemoaned his presence at the conference. During the speech however the crowd largely remained attentive, silent, and enthusiastic, except for one Orthodox rabbi who was carried off by security moments after he stood up to protest Trump ("Rabbi protests Trump's AIPAC speech" 2016).

At the same time as thousands of American Jews gathered inside of the 2016 AIPAC Policy Conference to welcome then candidate Trump, a very different movement of young Jewish Americans gathered outside of the convention center in protest of AIPAC and its decision to host Donald Trump. Unlike the group of Rabbis who unobtrusively protested the event and attended the rest of the conference, supporting

AIPAC and its pro-Israel mission, the majority of this group of Jewish protesters united to stand against both AIPAC and Trump. Comprising approximately 200 people, this protest was organized by IfNotNow (INN). Protests outside of AIPAC's events by American Jews, along with other interest groups such as those that are pro-Palestinian, are not an irregular occurrence. However, the 2016 protests outside of AIPAC's Policy Conference, and small groups from within, are significant, for they demonstrate the beginning of larger shifts taking place within American Jewish interest groups, stemming from American political changes.

By 2017, the number of American Jews who mobilized outside of AIPAC's annual Policy Conference grew by 500%, as compared to the year prior. With more than 1000 protestors, this was the largest, mostly Jewish, anti-AIPAC protest in the organization's 54-year history (Bellware 2017). Although American Jews have long protested and questioned the policies of established Jewish organizations, this particular protest should be regarded as significant both due its magnitude, along with the implications it relayed regarding a newly fissuring American Jewish divide. During the protest, activists sought to attract the attention of conference attendees. For example, four INN activists purchased tickets to the event, came inside, and dropped banners from the convention center's third floor asserting, "reject AIPAC and the occupation" before security guards quickly removed them from the venue (Gutman 2017).

These distinct groups of American Jews—gathering either inside AIPAC or outside the conference hall—depict the multitude of American Jewish responses to the rise of Trump. Whereas the vast majority of the group inside prioritized their support for Israel, the group protesting outside the conference united in protest of the American

Jewish establishment's unequivocal support for Israel and embrace of Donald Trump.

This example exemplifies the opposing visions of Judaism adopted by the groups gathered inside and outside of the conference; while particularism compelled conference attendees to continuously support Israel despite the costs, protesters were drawn by a value of social justice inherent to universalism.

### *J Street and AIPAC Conventions*

Since the 2016 election, the increase of attendance, or lack thereof, of prominent Democratic politicians at both AIPAC and J Street's annual national conferences, as well as INN's effective rallying calls to #SkipAIPAC, helps to indicate the extent to which the changing American political culture as well as political organizing by American Jewish groups have impacted American Jewish interest groups. In particular, factions within the Democratic party have affected AIPAC's historically friendly relationship to presidential candidates and have made J Street's policies more palatable to mainstream Democratic politicians. As compared to 2016 when all remaining Republican and Democratic primary candidates (besides Bernie Sanders) spoke at AIPAC, in 2019 and 2020, many major Democratic party candidates chose not to attend AIPAC's Policy Conference. In 2019, many of the major Democratic party candidates including Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Kamala Harris, and Mayor Pete Buttigieg skipped the event (Hagen 2019). At AIPAC 2020, the only candidate to speak in person was Michael Bloomberg, and Vice President Biden and Senator Klobuchar joined by video (Kelly 2020). Since the AIPAC 2020 Policy Conference overlapped with Super Tuesday it was difficult to determine the true extent to which evolving views of Israel have influenced candidates' choices to speak.

The lack of candidate attendance may be attributed to the Democratic party's evolving views on Israel as a result of growing political activism among (often young) American Jews. There is a growing partisan divide on Israel among both Democratic voters and candidates. Sheryl Stolberg in her article "Trump and Netanyahu Put Bipartisan Support for Israel at Risk," that this divide is "evident on the presidential campaign trail, where Democrats once vied to see who could be the most supportive of Israel. Now, some are vying to see who can be the most critical." (Stolberg 2019). Young liberal voters have pressured Democratic candidates to make the unprecedented choice to skip AIPAC's annual Policy Conference. IfNotNow and two other progressive groups that don't focus primarily on Israel, MoveOn and the Working Families Party, have led the #SkipAIPAC campaign (IfNotNow 2020). The campaign has pushed candidates to publicly commit to "not join AIPAC's stage, send in a video message, or attend any official or unofficial event affiliated with AIPAC's 2020 Conference (IfNotNow 2020). As a result of this campaign, two top contenders — Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders—agreed to boycott the conference. This move is significant, for it is the "first time top contenders...have boycotted the massive American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference, a signature event on the American Jewish calendar" (Boorstein 2020, paragraph 2).

Meanwhile, back in October 2019 several prominent Democratic presidential hopefuls spoke at J Street's 2019 national convention, which may illustrate the role that progressive Jewish Americans have played in shifting Democratic party leaders' views on Israel. J Street hosted five Democratic party candidates, including mainstream Democrats Mayor Pete Buttigiege and progressive leaders Senators Warren and Sanders.

While speaking, the candidates were not afraid to criticize Israel. For example, several candidates said they were “open to withholding aid from Israel if it annexed more land in the West Bank” (Medina 2019). In Jennifer Medina’s New York Times article, “2020 Democrats at J Street Conference Reflect New Tone on U.S.-Israel Relations,” she argues that the candidates’ willingness to speak openly about how they would address the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory demonstrates that “Democratic attitudes toward Israel are shifting in the highest echelons of the party” (Medina 2019). The democratic candidates’ attendance at J Street in larger numbers may also illustrate how the organization has benefited from the political polarization that challenge’s AIPAC’s ability to maintain bipartisanship over pro-Israel politics. These politicians might be understood as moving over from AIPAC to J Street because the organization’s vision and values are more palatable to mainstream democrats, allowing them to appeal to a broader spectrum of voters within the party.

### *AIPAC’s Challenges*

AIPAC has faced challenges since Trump’s election as a result of the President’s strategy “aimed at dividing the Democratic Party and pushing some Jewish voters into the arms of Republicans” through “paint[ing] Republicans as Israel’s only true friend in Washington” (Stolberg 2019). One example of this strategy was when Trump pushed “Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel into barring an official visit by the first two Muslim women in Congress” (Stolberg 2019). As Trump aims to gain the support of Jewish voters, especially single-issue voters seeking to elect candidates who support Israel, AIPAC has sought to retain bipartisanship despite challenges. As such, AIPAC split with Trump and Netanyahu on its decision to bar the congresswomen from entering

Israel, sharing in a statement that they believe “every member of Congress should be able to visit and experience our democratic ally Israel firsthand” (Jerusalem Post 2019). Many pro-Israel supporters from across the political spectrum also worry that “the president could further erode bipartisan support for Israel,” creating long term consequences including undermining Israel’s security, and furthering the United States’ position in the Middle East (Stolberg 2019).

At the same time that Trump has sought to divide the Democratic party on Israel, AIPAC has also embraced and praised the Trump Administration for taking concrete pro-Israel actions, such as moving the Israeli embassy to Jerusalem, and continue the decades-long ‘special’ relationship between the United States and Israel. AIPAC would argue that they have the same support from its members as always and that they have been incredibly successful in working with the Trump administration to institute pro-Israel policies. However, in spite of this support from the current President, AIPAC has faced challenges since the 2016 elections as a result of two phenomena: political polarization between Democrats and Republicans, and rifts between leftist and progressive factions within the Democratic Party. That AIPAC commands a large amount of power and recognition both within American Jewish life and American Politics means that the organization has often been subject to criticism. Nonetheless, the particular nature and fervor of AIPAC’s criticism and challenges by American Jews since 2016 has been unique and unprecedented in the organization’s decades-long history.

AIPAC’s embrace of both the Trump administration and Israel’s Netanyahu government calls into question the ability of AIPAC to garner support from both its Jewish Democratic members as well as politicians. For Democrats who align with



AIPAC's pro-Israel beliefs yet disagree with Trump's illiberal actions, embracing Israel in an age of unprecedented U.S. polarization will challenge their ability to express unwavering support. As Mark Mellman, the president of Democratic Majority for Israel, a nonprofit that works to ensure that the Democratic Party remains pro-Israel, described, "in our hyperpartisan world, the friend of my enemy is my enemy, and to the extent that Democrats look at Trump as the enemy, if they see Israel or the Netanyahu administration as operating hand in glove, that gives them real pause" (Stolberg 2019). Although AIPAC's membership today is likely split between Republicans and Democrats, Peter Beinart argues that these numbers will likely dwindle in the future as a result of demographic differences between younger and older American Jews. He describes that, for older American Jews, "their broader liberalism inclines them to vote Democratic. But their anxiety about Jewish safety and commitment to the Zionist project incline them to join AIPAC" (Beinart 2018). However, young (non-orthodox) American Jews are "less likely to bifurcate their views in this way" (Beinart 2018).

AIPAC has responded to these challenges by engaging in a struggle to maintain bipartisanship. According to Beinart, the organization is "doubling down on bipartisanship and ideological diversity even as tectonic shifts in American politics and culture make that harder and harder" (Beinart 2018). One example of this was AIPAC's appeal to left and progressive factions of the pro-Israel movement in attendance at 2018 Policy Conference. The President of AIPAC Mort Fridman pled to the many thousands of attendees, "the progressive narrative for Israel is just as compelling and critical as the conservative one...There are very real forces trying to pull you out of this hall and out of this movement and we cannot let that happen — we will not let that happen!" (Kampeas

2018). The organization has also responded to these challenges through hosting Democratic speakers—some to the left of Netanyahu. For example, AIPAC featured former Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, who called Israel a “progressive paradise” (Beinart 2018). The CEO of AIPAC, Howard Kohr, also endorsed a two-state solution, putting AIPAC “theoretically” to the left of Israel’s right-wing government (Beinart 2018).

Another important challenge that AIPAC has faced since the 2016 election are the significant internal changes within the Democratic Party. These changes have made it more difficult for AIPAC to appeal to their left-leaning membership as well as target Democratic politicians. One of the most significant and recent examples of progressive politicians questioning AIPAC’s power is Minnesota Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar vocal criticism of Israel and AIPAC. In February, Omar responded to a “tweet from journalist Glenn Greenwald, who posted about House GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy threatening to punish Omar and another congresswoman for being critical of Israel” (Nelson 2019). Omar posted, "It's all about the Benjamins baby," suggesting that the reason the U.S. solidly supports Israel is because of money (Nelson 2019). This tweet sparked extensive criticism arguing that the tweet was anti-Semitic, for it called upon a “negative and harmful stereotype of Jewish Americans” regarding Jewish people, money, and political influence (Nelson 2019). Omar apologized and said that she was learning about "the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes," yet still “reaffirm[ed] the problematic role of lobbyists in our politics, whether it be AIPAC, the NRA or fossil fuel industry” (Omar, Twitter, 2019). This incident illustrated the vast disagreements between progressive democrats and Democratic party leaders, like Speaker Nancy Pelosi, on Israel (and other

topics). In response to Omar's remarks, the House passed a resolution condemning hatred, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; Jewish Democrats had initially pushed for version of the resolution that focused only on condemning anti-Semitism (Marcos 2019). In reference to Omar's tweet, Pelosi spoke at AIPAC Policy Conference the month following, saying that "the full House came together to condemn the anti-Semitic myth of dual loyalty and all forms of bigotry" (Marcos 2019).

Overall, changes in American politics since 2016 have confronted AIPAC's commitment and mission of bipartisanship, their members' willingness to continue coming together and reach across the aisle and support pro-Israel causes, and the organization's power within Washington. As a result, challenges to bipartisanship and the growing divergence of views within the Democratic party make it more difficult for AIPAC to control a narrative of widespread support for Israel. The growth and mobilization of the two other case study organizations are an important part of this picture and will be discussed in the following subsections.

### *The Jewish Left*

Fundamental changes in American Politics have led to growth, challenges, and polarization on the Jewish left. The mobilization of far-left progressive groups have led to a divergence between left and far-left groups. Although these groups do agree on some principles and share liberal values that promote the importance of social justice and human rights, these groups disagree as to how to approach a Jewish connection to Israel. Whereas center-left groups promote the unique Jewish connection to the land of Israel, groups further to the left either reject Zionism altogether or remain silent on this issue. The differences of views between these two groups, and how the rise of Trump catalyzed

the growth of far-left-progressive groups, creates challenges for Jewish groups on the center-left. I will explore the divergence of views and complicated relationship between Jewish groups on the center- and far-left through examining the relationship between J Street and IfNotNow.

The differences in age and ideology between the progressive- and center-left within American Jewish Israel-politics mirrors the broader schisms within American politics more generally. Within the democratic party, younger people are challenging the older, more established leaders and groups to better integrate progressive norms into the broader party platform. The same is occurring within American Jewish life, particularly with Israel-politics. As Michelle Boorstein describes in her Washington Post article, “#SkipAIPAC comes from new generation of Jewish activists,” these new groups are “the product of post-millennial liberal politics, with antipathy toward nationalism of all kinds and a hunger to tear down the entire system of money in politics” (Boorstein 2020). While J Street’s founder Jeremy Ben Ami did say that he finds IfNotNow “really exciting,” he also finds the newer groups distancing from pro-Israel norms as “extraordinarily sad” (Boorstein 2020) (Reisman 2019, paragraph 11). Whereas J Street sees itself as providing a liberal alternative to AIPAC, Ben Ami describes how younger progressive groups separate themselves from J Street through expressing “‘you don’t have to be pro-Israel, you should be pro-human rights, and everyone should have a state’” (Boorstein 2020).

Since the 2016 election led to the empowerment and mobilization of far-left groups, represented by the growth of INN, this political event also furthered the divergence of views within the democratic party, and within American Jewish politics on

Israel. While the organization was founded prior to the 2016 election, IfNotNow's membership and mobilization grew in conjunction to broader and cumulatively progressive Democratic movements responding to the rise of Trump, championing an intersectional fight for social justice. Changes within the Democratic party leading to a schism between progressive and moderate factions has altered the Democratic party's platform and candidates' positions on Israel to more closely align with progressive views of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The mobilization of INN (and other like-minded organizations) are correlated with transformational changes within the Democratic Party and growing devotion to progressive causes and leadership. For example, IfNotNow's 2020 platform calls upon American public officials to join young Jewish Americans in "fighting for a better future — not just for American Jews but for all people" (IfNotNow 2020 Platform 2020). INN's two-pronged platform, "Defunding Occupation" and "Fight Anti-Semitism and White Supremacy," constructs the connection between all suffering and intolerance in the world today and promotes the importance of fighting for justice for all peoples and not only the Jewish people (IfNotNow 2020 Platform 2020).

INN also understands itself as part of a progressive coalition that seeks to bridge the ideological and generational divides within the Democratic party. For example, INN aligned itself with other progressive Democratic organizations to share a #YouthVote Letter with the presumptive Democratic nominee for the 2020 presidential election, Vice President Joe Biden. The groups asked Biden to champion a set of progressive policies regarding climate change, gun violence prevention, immigration, and healthcare (among others) in order to "earn the support of our generation and unite the party for a general election against Donald Trump" (#YouthVote Letter to Joe Biden, 2020).

Meanwhile, younger generations of supporters have also sought to push forward more progressive changes within mainstream institutions, like J Street, to maintain relevance, galvanize support, and meet the challenges of the current moment. One example of this was when thirty-five of J Street U's (the university affiliate of J Street) past and present board members sent a letter to J Street's founder and president Ben-Ami and the J Street Board asking for the organization to take "bold action ... that responds appropriately to this political moment" by "imposing actual, tangible costs" for Israel's occupation policies (Current and former members of J Street U National Board 2018) (Saleh and Grim 2019). As justification for taking these actions, the J Street U board members cited changes in the base of the Democratic party as their reasoning:

In the past we may have feared that such a move would have compromised a base of support among key backers. However, recently documented shifts in the base of the Democratic Party and the successful campaigns of Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, candidates to J Street's left who are widely supported by young people in particular, demonstrate that there could be widespread support amongst the democratic base for a strategic yet sharper-edged posture towards the Israeli-occupation—and that J Street must activate this base, at least partially in order to be in tune with the politics of our generation (Current and former members of J Street U National Board 2018).

This letter illustrates that young people actively involved in J Street both recognize the importance of what is happening to the left of their group through the energy of young progressive Jews, and how the growth of this movement represents inherent challenges to J Street. They see that in order for their organization to stay relevant and to continue making a difference they will have to evolve their policies and efforts to the challenges of the current times. The 2018 J Street U letter also clearly demonstrates how the 2016 election, and the fundamental changes in American politics stemming from it, directly impacts their interest group's power, political base, and views of their supporters.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in chapter 2, there were already existing divisions across American Jewish life prior to 2016, including vastly different generational experiences and political divides. The 2016 election however played an important role in furthering trends of political mobilization on the far left, as well as contributed to political polarization. The transformations within American political culture resulting from the 2016 election furthered the already existing divisions among American Jews.

This chapter depicts the interaction between American politics and American Jewish political life. The many different groups of American Jews have had opposing reactions to the election of Donald Trump and his alignment with establishment pro-Israel interest groups' policies. Some American Jewish interest groups have thanked Trump for his pro-Israel policies. For others, establishment organizations' support for Trump's pro-Israel policies have further alienated them from these institutions. Many liberal Jews have organized into progressive groups that question not only Trump's illiberal policies towards other minority groups but also their own community's role in perpetuating injustice towards the Palestinian people.

The growing divide between American Jews over Israel is similarly entangled with the evolving opinions of American Democratic politics on Israel. At the same time as young American Jewish have flocked to liberal organizations that are more critical of Israel, Democratic politicians have taken a new approach to Israel. For example, several of the progressive, female candidates who won during the 2018 midterm election have explicitly challenged mainstream groups and politicians with outspoken pro-Israel views.

The direct impact of American politics on American Jewish politics related to Israel can be seen through each of the three case study organizations representing different populations and beliefs of American Jews. The alignment of Trump with Israeli PM Netanyahu, and AIPAC's support for Trump have made AIPAC's efforts of retaining its democratic base more difficult. Bipartisanship has grown increasingly rare across American politics, yet establishment leaders have continued to promote the idea that being pro-Israel is essentially bipartisan. With so many Democratic members who support their organization, AIPAC feels that they must push back on those who challenge bipartisanship through bringing in more liberal speakers and appealing to the progressive wing of the organization to stay involved. On the center-left, J Street has received more support from Democratic leadership who have grown more publicly critical of Israel since 2016, while still wanting to support the state's right to exist. However, young Jews involved with J Street have simultaneously watched the energy grow further to their left, leading them to question whether the future of their organization requires them to become more progressive. On the far-left, American Jewish interest groups have experienced massive growth in their protests and involvement since 2016. They have aligned with other Jewish and non-Jewish interest groups to push back against the Jewish establishment's support for Israel. The distinctions between the Jewish center-left and progressive interest groups has also grown clearer, especially as groups like IfNotNow cross certain red lines.

The impact of American politics on these three case study organizations illustrates that the 2016 election played an important role in shaping of American Jews' political



opinions and interest groups, leading to challenges to bipartisanship and spurring into action progressive groups seeking to end the Israeli occupation.

## Conclusion

My thesis sought to answer the research question, how have fundamental changes in American political culture since the 2016 election shaped American Jews political stances and affected the representation of viewpoints within American Jewish interest groups? My research brings light to the growing polarization and mobilization across American Jewish life today. These changes were a result of already existing internal American Jewish divides and trends, including generational differences and the diverging beliefs of American and Israeli Jews, that were then furthered catalyzed by changes in American political culture resulting from the 2016 election.

When I first began my research to answer this question, I realized that there was a real deficiency of polling data that studied the relationship between recent changes in American politics and those experienced within American Jewish political life. Therefore, I sought other forms of evidence for this link, relying upon an organizational analysis. By analyzing three organizations that represent different aspects of American Jewish life, political opinions, and cultures, I depicted the many interrelated trends occurring across different groups of American Jews today. When examined together, these trends illustrate a constantly evolving American Jewish community, malleable to the secular political and cultural trends occurring within the United States.

For those interested in this research question, further analysis and polling data are necessary to better understand the connection between changes in American politics and that within American Jewish life (as well as other religious or affinity groups). Although

I chose to explore how recent changes in American politics impacted American Jewish politics through looking specifically at Jewish Israel-related organizations, these changes affected other realms, including mobilizing progressive Jewish organization focused solely on promoting social justice, and not on Israel.

## **Divisions**

The rise of Trump in 2016—and the subsequent transformations within American political culture—furthered and illuminated the already existing divisions within American Jewish politics. Trump’s unprecedented support for the Israeli right-wing government, as well as his polarizing presidency, have created new challenges and opportunities for American Jews across the political spectrum. Many young and liberal Jews have joined the subsequent progressive political protests in response to Trump’s election and his anti-Minority policies. Other mainstream Democratic Jews who are emotionally attached to Israel have had to grapple with how to support a cause that is now aligned with Trump. The recent growth of a progressive anti-Israel wing within the Democratic party has also challenged pro-Israel Democrats, pushing them to wrestle between their value of social justice and attachment towards Israel. At the same time, the leaders and members of establishment Jewish institutions who lean more to the right on the issue of Israel have been forced to respond to the ever-changing demographic of American Jews, especially young Jews.

Young American Jews’ increasing participation in liberal movements as a result of the 2016 election aligns with broader trends among young people across America. The rise of Trump added fuel to progressive social movements that mobilized to counteract

Trump's conservative and anti-minority policies. These American Jews have been active participants in these broad-based protests for the rights of underrepresented minorities in America. For instance, thousands of people from across the country showed up at "protests to speak out against the detention and mistreatment of undocumented immigrants" (Kuruvilla 2019). American Jewish support for liberal causes efforts has grown increasingly organized. Never Again Action, a Jewish organization founded in June 2019 "fighting to end the US' cruel immigration policies" now has 50 local chapters throughout the United States (Never Again Action). Since 2016, progressive American Jews have not only come together to support their neighbors and allies but also have supported causes that strike closer to home. They have formed and mobilized into organizations, seeking to end American Jewish organizations' monetary and political support for the Israeli occupation of Palestinians.

The resulting divisions within the American Jewish community over Israel politics also mirrors the broader societal discord between progressive and conservative Americans. American Jewish discord is just one instance of many wherein the rise of Trump furthered existing disagreements and disunity within affinity groups. The transformation of American Jewish political opinions and interest groups relays that the 2016 election impacted American life in many ways, pervading religious life and making cohesion among communities and their beliefs much more difficult.

### **Narrowing In**

American Jews' participation and leadership in progressive American political protests to support the political rights of minorities show how Jews have integrated

themselves into broader American political culture. Their willingness to create and join progressive movements that lift up other minorities demonstrates their commitment to universalism. As a minority that has faced severe persecution, American Jews are concerned not only with the well-being of their community today but also with ensuring the rights of others. Newer and progressive organizations approach historical Jewish suffering history as all the more reason to support other oppressed people in the world and transform oppressive institutions. For example, Never Again Action asks Jews to join the fight for undocumented immigrants in ICE detention centers because “Anne Frank didn’t die in a gas chamber. Anne Frank died because she caught an infectious disease in a concentration camp. We have seen this before. We won’t let it happen again. Never again is now” (Never Again Action).

Like their progressive allies across America, progressive Jews have grown increasingly wary of powerful institutions that dictate what to believe and support. Instead, young Jews have flocked to join organizations that instead allocate power into the hands of the people, as opposed to the leadership. For instance, the mobilization and growth of IfNotNow illustrates that young Jews, like the rest of their secular peers, seek truth and uphold universal values that prioritize an intersectional understanding of justice.

On the other hand, among establishment American Jewish institutions there is a resistance to change. Historical Jewish suffering motivates Jews to support the security of modern-day Israel at all costs. Within organizations like AIPAC, public criticism of Israel is off-limits—at the risk of legitimizing the arguments of one’s enemies. However, placing limits on an internal conversation regarding Israel’s flaws, particularly its mistreatment of the Palestinian people and more than fifty years of Occupation, has had

real costs. Although for some American Jews Israel and Zionism are so bound up in their identity that they are willing to incur these costs to support Israel, others are not willing to sacrifice this for their values that emphasize ensuring the rights and justice of all peoples. Establishment organizations' resistance to evolving with the current times has, as a result, led to real sacrifices in terms of gaining widespread support from young Jews. These organizations' positions likely have and will continue to alienate young American Jews, furthering the trend of "distancing." As such, if these institutions continue on the current path, it will contribute to a birth-cycle effect in which the percentage of Jews in younger generations feel less and less of an emotional attachment to Israel.

Of course, there are some American Jews who have sought a middle ground, supporting liberal Zionist organizations like J Street that straddle promoting a Jewish connection to Israel as well as human rights and social justice. However, trends of political polarization—both across America and within Jewish communities—have brought right-leaning and leftist American Jews further from one another ideologically. This trend has made a compromise of values increasingly difficult and has strengthened forces from both sides to pull centrist groups in two different directions. For instance, university-level leadership in J Street has found the newfound energy among youth in progressive organizations compelling, recognizing that to take advantage of this energy and power, their organization must compromise and evolve with the times.

The nature of the modern world has created further challenges and opportunities for change. Technology has improved access to information and made possible the mobilization of young Americans from across the country. IfNotNow's #youneveroldme campaign, in which alumni of Jewish organizations describe their experiences in

American Jewish institutions that blocked access to information and shared a one-sided perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, would not have been possible to the same extent fifteen-years ago. Without access to information through the internet regarding the conflict, and to social media that allows opportunities to connect with others with similar experiences, many of the changes today would not have been possible.

### **Zooming out**

The changes in American Jewish life explored throughout my thesis depict the way that American politics impact the internal politics of affinity and religious groups. Although such groups like American Jews often have their own prevailing internal cultures and conflicts, they are simultaneously influenced by the broader societal cultural movements of its time. In American Jewish life and elsewhere, the influence of outside culture and politics on the groups internally can spark new challenges; groups might become torn between preserving tradition and the existing status quo as opposed to reforming practices and beliefs to the modern day. This tension between maintaining tradition and transforming to fit into the contemporary values can be seen within the conflict between American Jewish Israel-related groups. The vast spectrum of beliefs—from unwavering support for Israel on the right to upholding solidarity with the Palestinians on the far-left—illustrates the diverging political responses of American Jews as a result of confronting the modern world. Whereas the right has clung to traditional values, the far-left has embraced present day values of social justice and human rights. These different approaches demonstrate the challenges that the modern

world creates in terms of interactions with particular groups with their own internal cultures, values, and politics.



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